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LUXURY PERIODICAL
invertebrate edition

UNREAL PRESS

MIXTAPE
HYPERBOREA

INDEFINITE JEST

EST TO M

by Anonymous

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Anonymous Tue Apr 4 23:28:07 2023 No.21873701
Quoted by: >>21873964

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No one else wants to do it.

STEAL THESE STORIES!

Chaotic neutral artist raised in milquetoast protestant suburbia overcomes perilous addiction, madness, poverty, and abuse by founding a literary magazine the eventual trajectory of which finally compounds in a metareferential work of microfiction during the first pages of his most recent issue.

Protagonist hatches a plan to break into the Parliamentary Archives, so that he can alter documents for one of the Offences Against the Person Act (1861), thereby, he believes, erasing his criminal liability for the murder he committed.

A world inhabited by men who enslave the offspring of a giant spider and who work the mines. the king believes he can ascend to the stars by rituals of gold. Arachnia The Black spins a web between the peaks of the mountains, blocking his path, and demands the release of her children.

An elderly man, who has recently buried his life partner, finds an old book and discovers that the book hides a cipher within. He decodes the book, only to find out that a genie is trapped inside. After the initial shock they come to an agreement where the man will help free the genie, and the genie will in return bring back his deceased wife. The genie warns the man that bringing back the dead wife means that somebody else will have to die, but the old man refuses to heed his warnings. Together they go on a grand adventure together blah blah and eventually manage to set the genie free, who holds up his part of the deal and resurrects the dead wife, vanishing himself in the process. The book ends with the old man happy to have his wife back, but devastated by the loss of his friend, who he had grown quite close to.

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzling November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me. There now is your insular city of the Manhattans, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs—commerce surrounds it with her. Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme downtown is the battery, where that noble mole is washed by waves, and cooled by breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land. Look at the crowds of water-gazers there. Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon. Go from Corlears Hook to Coenties Slip, and from thence, by Whitehall, northward. What do you see?—Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. Some leaning against the spiles; some seated upon the pier-heads; some looking over the bulwarks of ships from China; some high aloft in the rigging, as if striving to get a still better seaward peep. But these are all landsmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks. How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here? But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. Strange! Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the land; loitering under the shady lee of yonder warehouses will not suffice. No. They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in. And there they stand—miles of them—leagues. Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues—north, east, south, and west. Yet here they all unite. Tell me, does the magnetic virtue of the needles of the compasses of all those ships attract them thither? Once more. Say you are in the country; in some high land of lakes. Take almost any path you please, and ten to one it carries you down in a dale, and leaves you there by a pool in the stream. There is magic in it. Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries—stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going, and he will infallibly lead you to water, if water there be in all that region. Should you ever be athirst in the great American desert, try this experiment, if your caravan happen to be supplied with a metaphysical professor. Yes, as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever. But here is an artist. He desires to paint you the dreamiest, shadiest, quietest, most enchanting bit of romantic landscape in all the valley of the Saco. What is the chief element he employs? There stand his trees, each with a hollow trunk, as if a hermit and a crucifix were within; and here sleeps his meadow, and there sleeps his cottage; and up from yonder cottage goes a sleepy smoke. Deep into distant woodlands winds a mazy way, reaching to overlapping spurs of mountains bathed in their hill-side reefs. But though the picture lies thus tranced, and though this pine-tree shakes down its sighs like leaves upon this shepherd's head, yet all were vain, unless the shepherd's eye were fixed upon the magic stream before him. Go visit the Prairies in June, when for scores on scores of miles you wade knee-deep among Tiger-lilies—what is the one charm wanting?—Water—there is not a drop of water therel! Were Niagara but a cataract of sand, would you travel your thousand miles to see it? Why did the poor poet of Tennessee, upon suddenly receiving two handfuls of silver, deliberate whether to buy him a coat, which he sadly needed, or invest his money in a pedestrian trip to Rockaway Beach? Why is almost every robust healthy boy with a robust healthy soul in him, at some time or other crazy to go to sea? Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. Now, when I say that I am in the habit of going to sea whenever I begin to grow hazy about the eyes, and begin to be over conscious of my lungs, I do not mean to have it inferred that I ever go to sea as a passenger. For to go as a passenger you must needs have a purse, and a purse is but a rag unless you have something in it. Besides, passengers get sea-sick—grow quarrelsome—don't sleep of nights—do not enjoy themselves much, as a general thing;—no, I never go as a passenger; nor, though I am something of a salt, do I ever go to sea as a Commodore, or a Captain, or a Cook. I abandon the glory and distinction of such offices to those who like them. For my part, I abominate all honorable respectable toils, trials, and tribulations of every kind whatsoever. It is quite as much as I can do to take care of myself, without taking care of ships, barges, brigs, schooners, and what not. And as for going as cook,—though I confess there is considerable glory in that, a cook being a sort of officer on ship-board—yet, somehow, I never fancied broiling fowls;—though once broiled, judiciously buttered, and judiciously salted and peppered, there is no one who will speak more respectfully, not to say reverentially, of a broiled fowl than I will. It is out of the idolatrous doting of the old Egyptians upon broiled ibis and roasted river horse, that you see the mummies of those creatures in their huge baken-houses the pyramids. No, when I go to sea, I go as a simple sailor, right before the mast, plumb down into the forecastle, aloft there to the royal mast-head. True, they rather order me about some, and make me jump from spar to spar, like a grasshopper in a May meadow. And at first, this sort of thing is unpleasant enough. It touches one's sense of honor, particularly if you come of an old established family in the land, the Van Rensselaers, or Randolphs, or Hardicantes. And more than all, if just previous to putting your hand into the tar-pot, you have been lording it as a country schoolmaster, making the tallest boys stand in awe of you. The transition is a keen one. I assure you, from a schoolmaster to a sailor, and requires a strong decoction of Seneca and the Stoics to enable you to grin and bear it. But even this wears off in time. What of it, if some old hunks of a sea-captain orders me to get a broom and sweep down the decks? What does that indignity amount to, weighed, I mean, in the scales of the New Testament? Do you think the archangel Gabriel thinks anything the less of me, because I promptly and respectfully obey that old hunk in that particular instance? Who ain't a slave? Tell me that. Well, then, however the old sea-captains may order me about—however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way—either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thumb is passed round, and all hands should rub each other's shoulder-blades, and be content. Again, I always go to sea as a sailor, because they make a point of paying me for my trouble, whereas they never pay passengers a sing'lar penny that I ever heard of. On the contrary, passengers themselves must pay. And there is all the difference in the world between paying and being paid. The act of paying is perhaps the most uncomfortable infliction that the two orchard thieves entailed upon us. But being paid,—what will compare with it? The urbane activity with which a man receives money is really marvellous, considering that we so earnestly believe money to be the root of all earthly ills, and that on no account can a monied man enter heaven. Ah! how cheerfully we consign ourselves to perdition! Finally, I always go to sea as a sailor, because of the wholesome exercise and pure air of the fore-castle deck. For as in this world, head winds are far more prevalent than winds from astern (that is, if you never violate the Pythagorean maxim), so for the most part the Commodore on the quarter-deck gets his atmosphere at second hand from the sailors on the forecastle. He thinks he breathes it first; but not so. In much the same way do the commonalty lead their leaders in many other things, at the same time that the leaders little suspect it. But wherefore it was that after having repeatedly smelt the sea as a merchant sailor, I should now take it into my head to go on a whaling voyage; this the invisible police officer of the Fates, who has the constant surveillance of me, and secretly dogme me, and influences me in some unaccountable way—he can better answer than any one else. And, doubtless, my going on this whaling voyage, formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago. It came in as a sort of brief interlude and solo between more extensive performances. I take it that this part of the bill must have run something like this: "Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States. "WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL. "BLOODY BATTLE IN AFGHANISTAN." Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces—though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides coaxing me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from unsway'd, fearless, and discriminating judgment. Observe, then, these motives were the

A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR / INDEFINITE JEST

Dear /lit/,

It's me again. Thank you for your patience, as always. A lot has happened since I last addressed you as the skipper of this wayward vessel, my untimely incarceration, grief and mourning, an incredible heartbreak. It's not worth reiterating; I know you've heard it all before. Although entirely my own fault, my character exposition in this story has become increasingly uncomfortable for me, which is how I know that it is the correct path to walk, the narrow path. I have lost so much so quickly, again and again. I'm not sure of the things I've previously said. I will probably repeat myself anyway.

This is my redemption arc. I have come so far: dead friends, dead lovers, dead dreams. I am haunted by ghosts, real ghosts. I can barely stand it all sometimes. Smithereens. That's all that is left inside of me. A prison without walls. It feels like walking into the earth, pushing against everything underneath me.

Life is a perfectly timed joke. So perfect. If you are not laughing, you are being laughed at. I do not want to be the only one not rolling on the floor. It's a beautiful prank. And I've let myself wear my own vulnerabilities on my sleeve to the disservice of my own reputation, sure. And I've likely displaced myself as the enigmatic mage behind this silly and protracted work of degenerative autofellatio—in my own stead, a lowly and addicted projection, a frail man. There is too much to entail. I therefore acquiesce all of the emotional labor that I owe.

My friend, Zulu Alitspa:

Well met and glad to be here, Hartley.

It was my pleasure upon opening the official & email inbox to discover a submission which fully encapsulates the unique magic of the 4chan greentext, although it probably wouldn't qualify as high literature. *Husky Mutt Puppy* by A.V. Montdardier is a heartchurning tale of a child who yearns just a bit too hard for a specific type of friend. When the fruits of their autistically pathological desires come home to roost, they discover that the bargain is just getting started.

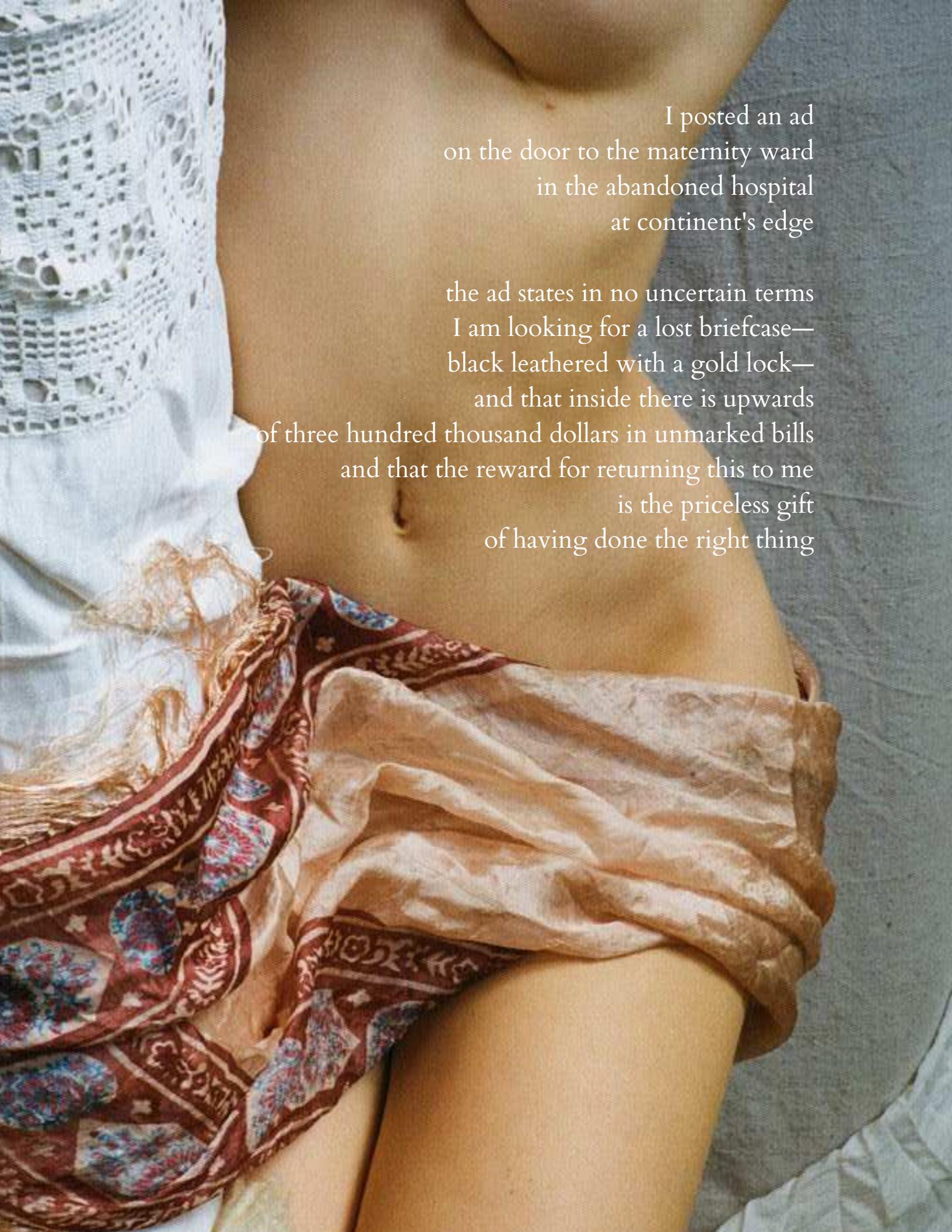
After that, we've got a gripping tale of revving engines and tables turned in a dystopian wasteland by Lucas Bineville. From Jack Norman comes a contemplative story of an overcivilized man who goes to the countryside seeking far less than he actually finds.

Upon my ascension to the editorial board of & magazine, I sent a demand for tribute to the editors of all inferior publications. David Herod of *Tooky's Mag* was the only one meek enough to actually comply, with his sufficiently amusing tale of wordcounts and worldbuilding, *The Fantasist's Grindset*.

Finally, if you only read one article in this edition, I'd recommend the excerpt of *Mixtape Hyperborea* by Adem Luz Reinspect, which is followed by (is it possible there are no coincidences?) an interview with Adem Luz Reinspect, author of *Mixtape Hyperborea*. Even better, skip the spoilers and go order a copy now.

Until next edition, Zulu Alitspa.



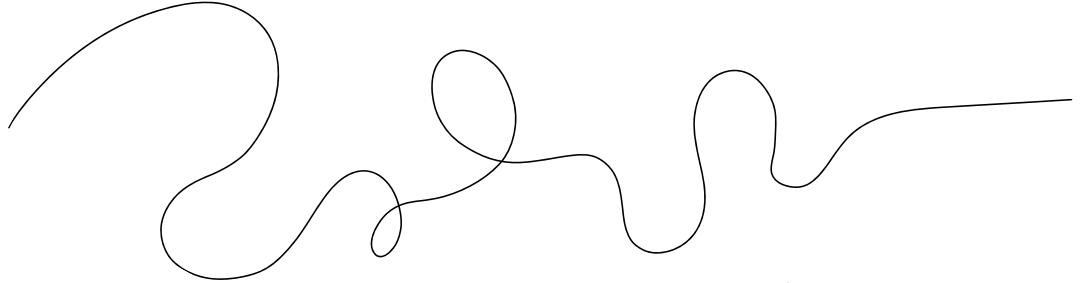


I posted an ad
on the door to the maternity ward
in the abandoned hospital
at continent's edge

the ad states in no uncertain terms
I am looking for a lost briefcase—
black leathered with a gold lock—
and that inside there is upwards
of three hundred thousand dollars in unmarked bills
and that the reward for returning this to me
is the priceless gift
of having done the right thing

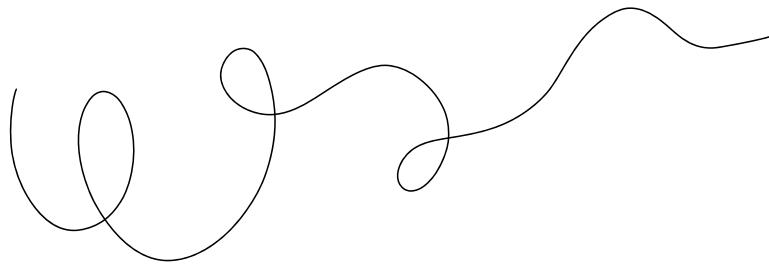


**HUSKY
MUTT
PUPPY**



I was seven years old when I decided to make my mother's life an unending nightmare. At that age I had come to the realization that I longed for the companionship of a husky mutt puppy. In math class I daydreamed about rescuing a noble arctic canine from its snowy prison in Alaska and pampering it with affection in the warmer climates of my hometown. I would name her Amundsen, after the famous arctic explorer, and in July I would take her outside, look into her blue eyes, and shave her fur down to a short coat so she wouldn't succumb to heat exhaustion. She would bury ice cubes in the backyard, and yelp in puzzlement when she tried to dig them up the next day only to find they were missing. In winter we would play fetch, and I would watch her tiny body leap in and out of the snow as she bounded across frozen fields to retrieve our tennis ball. But my mother would not allow it. For this reason I ended our mutual companionship forever.

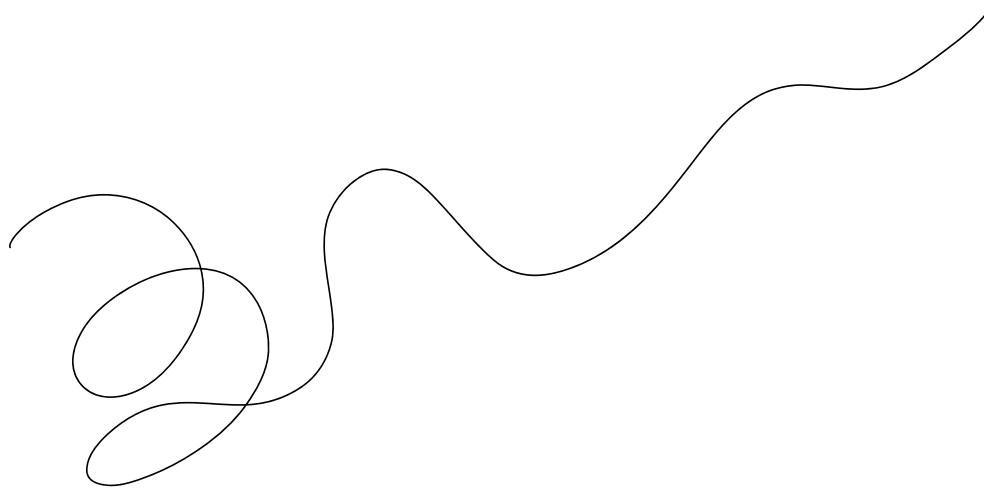
When watching television together and a dog appeared on screen I often made a despondent sigh to corrode at my mother's psyche like waves against a rock. When we went to the park together I sought out people walking their dogs, rushed over to them, and asked if I could pet her. I would run my palm along her gentle coat and my face would glow with a joy that I refused to feign for my mother whenever she pointed a camera at me. When passing the school for the blind I always pointed out the seeing-eye-dogs wrapped in their neon harnesses and let my mother know how well behaved and well trained they were. Once a week I asked her for a husky mutt puppy. Twice a week I told her I was the only kid in school without a pet. Three times a week I went out with a plastic bag and collected random dog turds so that I might feel some proximity towards dog ownership. Whenever she asked me where I was going I replied, 'to the pet store,' and I would go there, and look at the dogs, and long.



'Husky mutt puppy' became my default answer to every question. If my mother asked how my day was, my reply was 'it would be better with a husky mutt puppy.' If she asked what I wanted for dinner, my reply was 'pemmican is what arctic explorers fed their husky mutt puppies.' If she asked me what I learned in school, my reply was 'I wish I had a husky mutt puppy.' When we went to the doctor I asked him if depression could be caused by a lack of husky mutt puppy in one's life. When at a field trip to the aquarium I held a horseshoe crab and wondered aloud what holding a husky mutt puppy would be like, unaware that my mother was not chaperoning and my moping was for naught. It came to a point where my mother stopped talking to me.

I came home from school after a day that was distinctly lacking in its husky mutt puppy population to find that my mother had bolted my bedroom door shut and behind it I could hear something gently clawing at the wood. My arm went numb with excitement. I tasted copper on my tongue and perspired. My mother came sheepishly with the key and told me that she had it with my longing for a husky mutt puppy. It was all I ever talked about, she said, and imitated my epithets about how I had no blue eyed husky to go sleighing with, and how I longed to pick up turds which belonged to my very own husky mutt puppy. So while I was at school she had gone to the pet shop and finally got me something.

I opened my arms so when the door swung free Amundsen could leap into my arms, but instead there was only a throbbing mass of black hair wedged in the corner of my room, fidgeting anxiously. Was it a bear? A wooly giraffe in a fetal position? A massive, hulking, tangle of limbs and fur? It looked back at me with six bowling-ball sized eyes, twitching its chelicerae and heaving its body. When its spindly legs began to reach out I screamed as loud as I could, recognizing the creature's terrible visage.

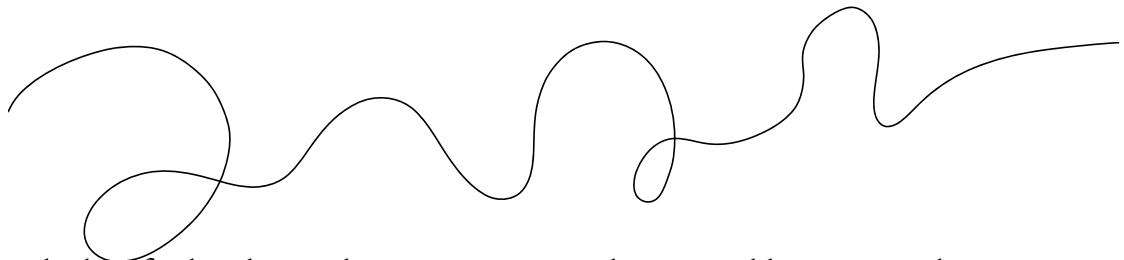


"It's a tarantula!" My mother said. "The biggest kind in the world! Over ten feet tall! Can you believe it?"

I was too busy screaming to reply.

After the spider hellbeast had been safely quarantined behind the door I was able to stop hyperventilating. I was going to tell her to take it back, that this was not my husky mutt puppy, that I would never love this abomination against pet ownership. My mother foresaw all of this before I could say a single word, and the following torrent spewed from her mouth, "Don't you dare tell me this tarantula isn't good enough for you! You're not entitled to have a pet! Stop complaining about how lonely you are when I went out and bought you this fantastic ten foot tall tarantula!" and then she stormed out of the house to her yoga class.

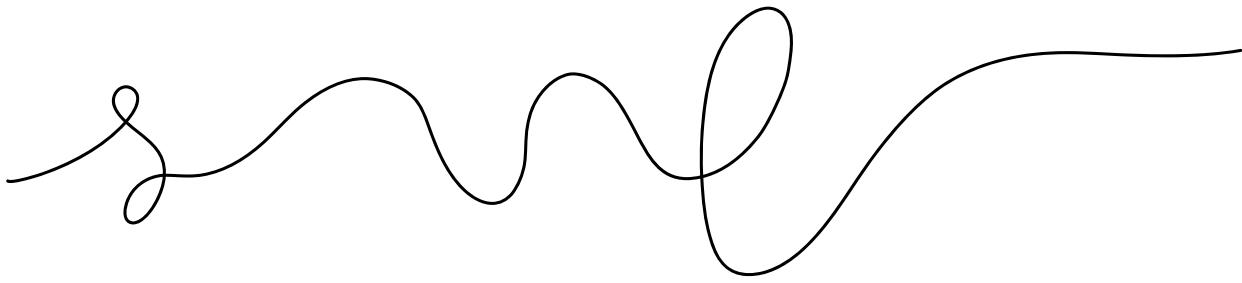
I named it Robert Falcon Scott, after the arctic explorer who starved to death. My mother didn't want it scurrying around the house messing up the ceiling and knocking things over, so it was confined to my bedroom. Robert Falcon Scott liked to share the bed with me. He would be the big spoon, I would be the little spoon shivering and sweating in fear until sunrise. When I wanted to be alone I let Robert Falcon Scott outside, and watch it climb into the elm tree in the front yard and disappear. People stopped walking by our house after word of Robert Falcon Scott's existence became widespread. I had to talk to the post office to get our mail from then on. Ordering girl scout cookies became a real hassle.



I had to feed Robert Falcon Scott twice a day. I would go out to the animal shelter and ask which dogs were about to be euthanized, and then pick two victims to come home with me. I took them to the park. I played fetch with them. I petted them and rolled around in the dirt with them. Sometimes if I jumped into the pond they followed and we would dog paddle together. Then I would take them home, give them to Robert Falcon Scott, and they always looked at me with eyes that called out my betrayal. I only watched it eat once. It would wrap up the dog in a web, bite it, and inject it with some sort of hellish mucus to melt the dog from the inside out. Then Robert Falcon Scott devoured it like a sinister hot pocket. Sometimes when I'm in bed with Robert Falcon Scott my mind conjures up memories of its awful spider lips smacking together and slurping dog flesh.

Once Robert Falcon Scott learned to open doors it often surprised me in the most unusual places. I would be taking a shower, and when shampooing my hair and tilting my head to look up at the ceiling, he would look down at me with its terrible bowling-ball eyes. He would wait for me in the kitchen. When I went into the garage to get my bike he would be there. When digging for fossils under the house's crawl space he hunted me and crept silently near. My mother got angry at me for screaming so much. I eventually lost my voice. It may come back one day, years from now, I hope.

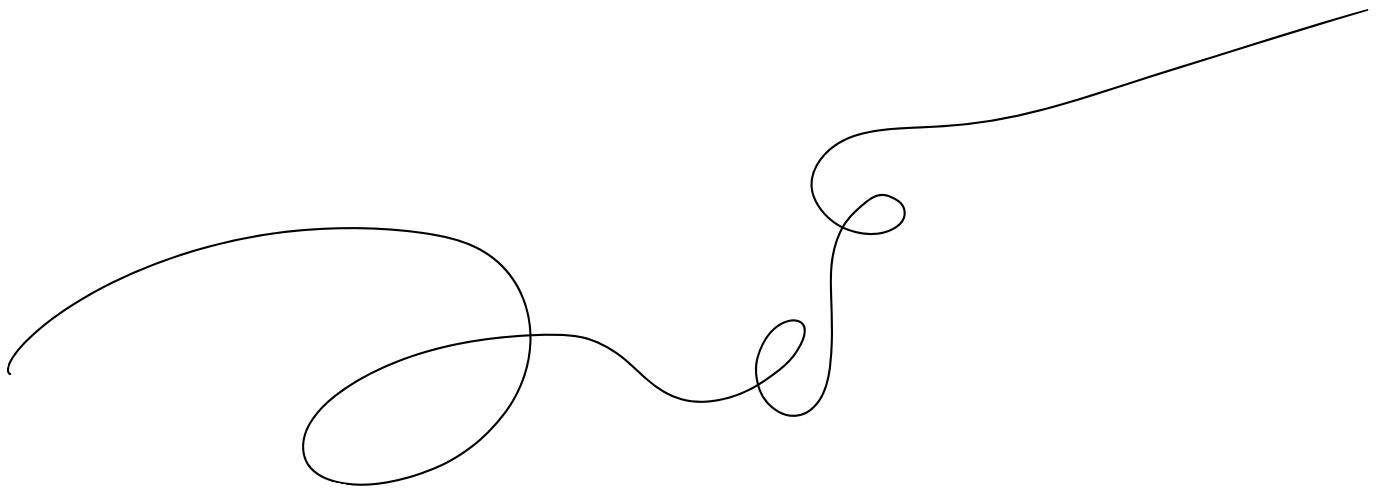
I hated Robert Falcon Scott. When I went to the dog shelter to pick up his latest meal I selected the tiniest and most sickly dogs available: Chihuahuas with missing legs, bony French poodles, rabid Pomeranians. I wanted it to starve and die. I wanted to be rid of it forever, and the emaciated dogs I fed it would be my method. Spiders don't lose weight, though, even when they're ten feet tall. Midway through my campaign to destroy Robert Falcon Scott one of the neighbors came to me and accused it of eating their welsh corgi. It probably did. It's not like I can keep a leash on that thing. The neighbor called me an asshole, forgetting that I was only seven years old, and then she told me I looked like shit. Probably because I wasn't getting much sleep.



I was making a food run to the animal shelter when I realized it was unusually silent. Whenever I show up there's always a pandemonium of yelping, yapping, yipping, yammering mutts throwing themselves into cage doors, urinating on the floor, crunching on kibble, scratching at plastic doors, but there was none of that now. The volunteer there told me that Robert Falcon Scott had single handedly eradicated the overpopulation of stray dogs in the neighborhood, so they only had one dog left to give me. He brought me over to a Siberian husky. It looked at me with a calm and noble demeanor, like a marquis led to the guillotine, and I thought of what could have been between us. I told the volunteer I couldn't feed that dog to that thing.
“Why not? We're just going to euthanize it, anyway.”

I asked him if he knew what principles were.

And then one day Robert Falcon Scott ate mom. I didn't see it happen, which is probably for the best. I did see that horrible thing eating one of its carnal hot pockets, and I noticed that the animal wrapped up in its spider-web tortilla was larger than usual, but I didn't piece together that it could have been her until a day later when I noticed she was missing. I may have wanted my mother to suffer for never letting me have my husky mutt puppy, but I never would have wanted her killed. I didn't even like having the dogs killed. My therapist thinks I may have repressed the memory, but if I did I hope it stays that way. At her funeral Father Liddle put his hand on my shoulder and said, “These things happen.”



To be lonely is a terrible thing. We're not built for it. We each need someone to lick our face and smile when we come home. If we have nothing else at least we have that. But there's a smile that I don't long to see, and I see it every day. A carnivorous smile on a thing that never feels love. It lives in my home. It has robbed from me my family and my future. Before Robert Falcon Scott's veterinarian was decapitated he told me that these particular spiders could live to be four hundred years old. I imagine my future. I'm old, bald, and frail, shuffling around a nursing home and that ungodly thing is still with me, outside, inside, at the foot of my bed. What did I do to deserve this fate, I wonder. And now this terrible inheritance is mine.

HUSKY MUL T PUPPY

A. V. MONTDARDIER

exam





NO ADONIS
HAS COME
TO STAY

EVERYTHING IN PROSERPINE was coastal, no matter how far it sat off the shore. It took shape well beyond the last gate at Conway Beach, and even seemed to go further, where lasting threads of spinifex brush marked the height of irregular tides through dead paddock floors, and salt still stained the walls in strange, outback places.

The bend of the Proserpine River ran through bushland and scrub and drenched them permanently in a reedy state of floodplain that seemed uncommon to the area. The many lengths of creek and stream it distributed broke at each meander and ran long or short off the force of its currents and gathered in stagnant pools across the forgotten sprawl of the old Hopf farm, where latrine mangroves infested the banks beneath their roots and brought with them grim tasting flathead that turned up the mud in search of water bugs and the cascaded litter of birds and fishermen.

The sharp edge of sand that stung the skin of bare calves was carried a long way into town on the astral forms of steady waves, you could see them rolling across country, silver through the tall heads of weed and grass, most evident in the blades of sugar cane awash on the edge of the highway. They were always rolling across those fields, towards the far bed of the western sun, rolling on the tumbled breath of the ocean wind that is fed up with the limits it has been drawn, and has asked to see what lies beyond...

Paul Poer found himself on the banks of the Proserpine River one afternoon, washed up by similar winds of chance and curiosity he had no part in forecasting or ritually summoning. They had made their way north from Coomera two days before and resolved to get there slowly and stop at small towns along the way to see what to see when they got there. To others they met on the road, they had a strange destination in mind. Paul began lying to them and said they were headed there to visit family to elicit understanding from those (the many, it seemed) who claimed to know Proserpine intimately and frowned at the prospect of a young family aimed at it for any reason.

At no point, faced with certain *on-the-trail* types who had a lean and vagabond kind of confidence about their opinions, did Paul confess they had first caught the germ of their idea from a small tourist pamphlet at the mega-pump service station on the M1 highway they used to commute home on most days. It had drawn the same scepticism from Diedre at first when he brought it to her over tea, but it did not take long for anything to stick in her ribs if presented more than once to her, and once she was taken with the idea, she began to imagine the tropical air she wanted them to breath on summer nights and the spacious paddocks future children of theirs could roam through safely, even after curfew had elapsed.

Nor had Paul confessed to himself, necessarily, that despite enjoying the quaint notions of rural bliss and peace time with her around the embers of the television, he had long thought of Proserpine more privately as the remedy to a certain set of sluggish habits he had acquired which resonated with something deeper in his person than the ordinary deference to fast food and sedentary weekends would suggest. He had the sure feeling that the sun must be brighter out there the further away you got from things. It burned hot enough to make men suffer and it gave them the courage to take their lives in their own hands. His habits had formed a mild depression that grew like soft coral on the barriers of his hips and under his back, but if took out into the country and exposed to all its elements, Paul felt they would burn away under the harshness of the sun and sting his skin so raw he would be forced to scab it over with dirt and character.

He had begun to think of middle age as a viral condition one succumbed to, which could only be prevented by the general spirit of pioneerism difficult to muster in most modern settings. A particular strain of the disease had recently gained foothold in circles of his friends and family who appeared dangerously willing to accept its symptoms as the natural process of growing older. He could not bear to watch them like that for long. The city began to feel claustrophobic. It was now obvious how fast certain pathogens travelled in such environments, and it occurred to Paul that, depending on a number of predisposing factors—age being the foremost and almost singular, though, he had theorised about the effects of other factors such as television news and refined sugar consumption—the condition of middle age might actually be contagious in confined settings.

But once they had arrived on the banks of the Proserpine River, it felt strange to finally be there—and too sudden. He thought he must have dreamed away the journey under the sedative effect of recycled air and the fugue of autopilot that came over most drivers on the highway. Diedre carted plastics and the empty soft drink bottles they had collected on the drive and dropped them in the public bins at the service station. The freckled complexion visible high on her chest made him think of her as a wife and the mother she was soon to be. He could not now remember the exact moment either of them had agreed on this course as the next stage of their lives. When had they truly mobilised, in their hearts, out and on this way? What discussion was it, and on which night, had they finally convinced themselves to pack their life up and haul it far away in the pursuit of something as aromatic as *lifestyle*?

When they arrived to meet with Paul's new office that first afternoon, the administration had forgotten about them. They said his transfer had been agreed on so many months prior that there was no one who was not on long service or maternity leave left to expect him. It meant their sponsored accommodation, though still vacant for them, had not been properly prepared in any way, and they would have to go without any furnishings for the foreseeable future.

Paul took it as a positive omen. The country demanded more of them.

Their first evenings were spent on the small veranda of the house with nothing in the way of electronics to entertain them. They spent hours on a pair of wicker chairs from next door, a pleasant renaissance of their old conversation and the spark that had first attracted them to each other, waiting as the evening crept coolly over the back end of town, at the complete mercy then of the pub meals down the road for tea. They slept on an air-mattress he kept the receipt pinned to for later reimbursement and they brewed coffee over the heat of the gas stove. Diedre said she was concerned for the health of the baby and what effect this kind of rough living might have on it, but Paul countered that women were pregnant the world over in all different forms of poverty, and the global population had only multiplied over the last century.

While they were early to bed and snoring on the first few nights they spent, as they began to settle in over the week, softened by the purchase of additional comforts and the arrival of their old mattress with the removalist, Paul became aware of the startling number of insects and other creatures that seemed to teem about the perimeters of their new home. The sharp sound of their constant humming and the chatter of carapace stayed with him for a long time on the surface of his sleep and sometimes took the form of ghosts and armed intruders in the early slippage of dream. The open nature of space that surrounded them, and the incredible vibrance of their local soundscape, caused him to feel exposed to the world outside in a way that had never occurred to him before through the thick concrete of rendered walls.

Their new walls were thin and made of timber and the house even stirred slightly under the late coastal winds that blew strong enough. The curtains indoors swayed slightly when the breeze came through small cracks in the floorboards, and he thought it made the room dreadfully cool in the mornings. In the warm comfort of his bed, Paul realised how little it was that separated him from the outdoors. Nothing could be seriously kept at bay that did not want to get inside. He felt there was no difference between lying in bed behind the locked door or standing alone under the full light of the moon outside. The bitumen was harsh on his feet where the new linen had been gentle with them. The softness of his stomach hung innocently over the waistband of his boxer shorts for predators of all natures—palaeolithic, sub-Saharan, or knife-wielding—to gore if they chose, they would only have to slash through his office kept hands if he tried to stop them. LiveLeak footage of the man slain by machete at the neck. And what prevented them from snatching at his genitals? loosely as they hung behind the silk fabric and his button fly left undone? Neighbouring dogs began to fight with each other through the fence. Was he really at the mercy of the world like that?

Paul had thought how literally the term *wildlife* corresponded with its definition. The roots of all the native trees around them ran deep amongst the floodplains and cultivated a unique biome at the edge of the Proserpine township which he felt must have gone largely unstudied. To live amongst such a setting! Were they like the early Boers or Louisianans? Large sized cormorants rested on the meagre perch of their clothesline. They dug through the marsh of his backyard after rain and the prolonged muck of dew and mud until flits of smaller birds ran them off in packs for no other reason than to see them gone. A hawk took the neighbours pomeranian one afternoon when she left it out on the deck—it was forced to drop the dog from several heights after some of the children next door threw sticks at it with remarkable aim. No amount of motion sensitive floodlight or television static managed to dissuade the encroaching nature of the water birds or any other creature that roamed for a living.

It should have been simple to reduce the amount of access animals had to familiar trees and grasses throughout the neighbourhood yards by trimming them regularly and mowing the lawns. But everyone here allowed their trees to grow exceedingly large and untrimmed, each busy with spiky fruits and flowers and intersected branches above the cross-sections of every other yard, heavy bushes grew along their fences in late stages of considerable girth that contained the hidden ploughs of lost footballs, sandshoes, action figures, and pornography clippings, and long periods of drizzle and rain soaked in them and cascaded through the branches and the feather wilts of flower and fern and made the earth cool and wet and flooded the depressed sections of the lawn beneath the clothesline that rotted the grass when it lingered long enough, and that was what they enjoyed indoors beneath a throw rug in the living room, listening for hours sometimes as the frogs croaked in the gutters or their dwelling spring beneath the house.

Paul could hardly walk between either side of his house and the fence. The long limbs on every bush extended over to the windowpanes and touched the old, rusted awnings that descended over each frame outside the kitchen and drawing rooms. They acted as highways for the forms of minute life that travelled between their home and the outdoors, many of which preferred to shelter with them at night. Paul found large spiders in the corner of every room in the home. At first, Diedre attempted to kill them with her shoe, until she grew ashamed of herself and asked him to ferry them into the yard in a plastic container. Finally, they gave up and permitted the spiders to stay—the old woman next door assured them they paid their way by killing any insect that blundered into their mirrors and the kitchen light bulbs.

Sometimes of a night, as he neared the deepest edge of sleep, the mating call of some marsupial wildlife nested in the overgrowth blared through his bedroom window. It was often so loud that it caused him to lay frozen for a long time, eyes awake to the pitch canvas of his ceiling, scanning like any prey animal for the echo location or trodden twig signal of nearby danger. It took him a very long time to let his guard down and he often spent hours in a prolonged state of arousal, identifying all evidence of life outside while the shadow of his bedroom revealed itself slowly, and the silent shapes of house geckos stalked the corners of every wall.

When the sun began to rise, it brought the early lorikeets about their daily routine. They screamed through the air and swarmed the surrounding bush for nectar and the red furs of bottlebrush flowers. There was something strangely ambient about the presence they held. Despite how loud they were, Paul had never noticed them by their sound alone. He had noticed, however, the way dozens of them could fly through the middle throughfares of the Main Street footpath without any collisions, or the raised attention of café patrons seated outdoors, so endemic to their senses that they could pass them by as unnoticed as any train hauling cane along the sugar mill line.

What troubled Paul about the lorikeets in the morning was the sound of them scratching when they gathered on the corrugated roof. Their talons etched at the weathered iron and resounded through the timber frame of the ceiling. He heard them from beneath his sleep, they scratched at the iron to get in, it was a disturbing sound at the best of times, and through the black mixture of his morning sleep, they distorted in shape and size and caused him to dream of rats.

The dream was so reoccurring by now that he rarely succumbed to his terror right away. In fact, he was beginning to nightmare quite comfortably. There were occasions on long mornings when he felt remarkably in control and had the time to write the extra detail of his inner wall frames and the layout of their ceiling spaces above them, where he was saw rats piled upon each other in nests and busy traffic lane.

It was a total infestation. The shagged, wild fur they kept made him think they had migrated from some humid hole in the floodplains, and not next door's garage like any brood of ordinary house pests. Sometimes, he observed them so intimately that he forgot his body in the middle of the bedroom and embraced the sense of swarm they shared over the air vent in the bathroom. Faeces shed like skin, but they always managed to make room. The stink of every rat was plain and simple like a child's breath, and he began to feel that he knew them, could know them, so long as they remained within the walls.

It never lasted. Eventually, the floor of the ceiling gave way, or, disturbingly, he took the form of one of their soldier rats and scratched through the flaked timber of his own laundry cupboard. They swept the house like the sheet of low tide across sand, and crawled beneath the covers with him, where he could not delay his horror longer. He felt them clawing against the naked skin of his back. Gooseflesh hardened when they nibbled in his ears. How far could common disease burrow through skin? He tried to stay still so as not to alarm them, but it gave them the freedom to inspect him callously. They tried to enter his mouth. Small paws peeled at his lips to open them. Climbed in the shorts of his boxers. Something pierced his scrotum. The end of his urethra began to burn. He screamed at Diedre to flee the bed with him, but she was not there, and he could not find the strength to move his legs. Under the weight of hundreds of rats, he screamed for what felt like hours until something was enough to wake him.

To begin with, they engaged pest control contractors in the area. Diedre found his dreams unsettling as well, she did not like the way he groaned in the night and woke shouting. But when the exterminator visited, he said he could not find any trace of vermin in the house—the ceiling was still well insulated, and in better condition than most. He agreed to fumigate it any way, and he laid baits in the walls and under the house. He left a receipt with his information that was good for a year's insurance, so they could call him back if they noticed any signs of pest activity.

When he was gone, Diedre scanned the ceiling for Paul with a torch and reported it back empty of anything living or dead. It's all in your head, Paul. She kept telling him. But she had never heard them scratching the way he did. Check again! You only ever look once! She hated it when he raised his voice at her. She shone the torch directly in his face. The multi-facets of the LED blinded him. He could only hear her—wherever she was now. She thrust the torch at him and bruised his lip with the hard plastic. That wasn't like her. He backed away. All fours? She cornered him between the stove and the wall, but he could not see her behind the torch, blinded like a common cretin by the light of Galadriel's phial. Hide in the walls? The LED bulbs burned plasma shapes into his vision. A glut of rats swarmed him, even beneath his eyelids. The likes of which he had only feared. Mating with each other, defecating, spawning hairless litters of offspring, overflowing with themselves and all kinds of plague...

"Rats again?" she asked.

She was awake already. Steam lingered in the bathroom across the hall. It smelled like soap and moisturiser. She rubbed cream onto her stomach to prevent stretch marks.

“Was I talking?”

“No, but I could tell. The birds are out.”

“They’re actually a relief once I’m up.”

“Maybe we should get one? It might help.”

“It’ll just keep us awake all night.”

She had already forgotten her mug on the bedside table. It was stained with the milky texture of her coffee that appeared dry and cold. That was the whole morning gone by then. The lawn mower next door poured into the bedroom with the sunlight when she opened the windows on him. Paraplegic terrier they kept looked soon to piss over the carpet if he didn’t take it outside.

“You need to get out of bed.”

“I’m too tired.”

“You aren’t going to call in sick again, are you?”

“I told you I wouldn’t this week.”

“Why don’t you have a shower? That might help.”

“I already showered yesterday.”

Once he had dressed out of the laundry hamper, Paul made his way into town on foot. Nothing was far enough to drive in Proserpine. The open fields between its handful of neighbourhoods connected the footpath behind his house to a network of park lanes and grass alley cul de sacs. It was not unusual for men and women of all ages to cut across the school grounds of a morning, the path across the junior oval led to the other side of the large block on Renwick Road, and no one expected them to walk the long way around.

Paul was rarely in that same hurry. He didn’t mind being late. It was an essential advantage he mustered against the symptoms of middle age that frightened at the thought of running out of time. They continued to plague him at every pedestrian crossing or bin put out for collection and waited to seize upon him the moment he conceded a single thought to styles of conventional wisdom. As with the yellow ooze of infection, or the bright blister of any rash, the primary symptom of his imminent middle age appeared to Paul as the gradual process of *giving in* that he had witnessed before in others. A special kind of lethargy rested heavy in the muscles of his back and his posture now required extreme attention to maintain and required that he sit more often than stand. His thighs felt thick and meaty and he felt he had to hoist them with each stride. But more serious was the sudden willingness he had developed to forfeit old notions of personal fantasy, passion, and elemental good cheer—they seemed to have exchanged themselves for a dispassionate form of wisdom that relied heavily on retrospect and the knowledge that afforded him about the past. He realised this was meant to equip him with the tools to look back now more often than forward. He felt his perspective shift above the hours of the day that now passed below him at a much faster rate than when he was swimming against their current. Everything passed along with them. Embittered feelings did not latch to his heart in the same way anymore. Days at a time could go by if he let them. It was the general teaching of an early vipassana class he had once abandoned after failing to understand, except it did not bestow the same feelings of liberation the guru woman had talked about. No desire to take control of himself—or despair at his inability to do so—could linger long enough to test him now. Time moved at such a swift pace, he thought of yesterday’s troubles, now gone, and in a way mourned for them, but he felt quite sure that life would basically come and go like this from now on.

The ease with which he walked behind the fenced gardens of old women signalled to anyone pottering their backyards that he was just passing through. Dogs inquired occasionally, but few bothered to bark. He met school students on the way who knew better than anyone the backways around this small set of lives. The way through rhodes grass weeds was indistinct but he found them partway parted still from yesterday and took the route by the heavy motor mechanics where trucks sat behind a tall chain fence. The impressions left in the grass evidence the few others who came this way as well. Drunks on their way home at night. Students on their bikes to school in the morning.

Nearer to town, the faint sound of a pedestrian crossing button died slowly in the metal casing, and barely thrummed adequately enough for the deaf who had to take its pulse. Paul crossed the last gully by the church, through the weeds again, of scutch grass and dandelions, and hopped the fence by the Anzac memorial in the church garden. He waited on Main Street and pressured the button three times out of habit to hurry the traffic to a stop.

The office of federal welfare and other to-dos was acrylic and newly renovated against the parched concrete. Getting in late meant you could avoid the loiterers at the front entrance who queued for early admission. Not that he was required to face the public much—something considered a mark of success in government settings, one that accrued exponential prestige the further you made it from what they called the *frontline*. Everyone shared such aspirations on the second floor of the Proserpine office, any amount of rural tenure reflected positively on their opportunities for advancement, or so they had heard through various channels of executive gossip. It was why no one in Paul’s office was local to the area. He found the rumour suspiciously strategic (it was now some fifteen hundred workers on rural secondment across the country), but he was satisfied by the remote packages and other salary benefits that came with the classification... he had so far resisted the temptation to lease a new hybrid car with his pre-tax income—consumer impulses being one of the major risk factors he had identified in cases of early onset middle age.

They often kept the windows open upstairs to the daytime breeze. There was no safety mechanism installed that prevented the lever function from opening outwards of the building. This was not considered a health and safety risk, despite the height of the second floor. The public service had never recorded a single suicide amongst its ranks. The conditions of most offices had been programmed strategically to comply with all levels of Maslow’s hierarchy so as to make it impossible for anyone to consider an exit through the window. It was why you often found government departments co-located in large buildings out of the way, given room enough to supply the necessary setting conditions, hidden amongst the sprawl of outer growth suburbs, provisioned by small cafes downstairs to prevent them from wandering too far.

The next plate of biscuits was coming by, just as Paul was sitting down, it was the favourite past time of their social club volunteers to include vegetable spices and fruit ingredients.

“Caramel slice?”

“Yes please!”

The breadth of his thighs spread across the office chair. It was homemade caramel he tasted, direct last night from sugar to stuff. They said it kept up the office morale. Mix it in with your coffee and you gained a bathroom break near the late morning. Everyone spoke about their diets, but no one could bring themselves to reject the trouble they must have gone to. Diedre thought he fasted in the mornings because he lied and said he did. She rubbed his stomach sometimes and said she could feel how lean he was getting because she knew how much that meant to him.

He was supposed to take up sport again with one of the local teams. They played crickets mostly or rugby league. The schoolboys were already out on the senior oval this morning running drills; the paper said it was getting close to representative season. Of an afternoon, if he stayed back late, fields of grass across town came alive with men and women jogging and playing games of skill between witches' hats. He pushed open the glass window then and listened to the general murmur of instruction and familiar conversation that swelled under the humid air. The smatter of local lives over every oval made them akin to the cranes and ibis that regularly populated the rain water drains: how they got there seemed as much as natural product of the afternoon as it did any leaflet schedule they had pinned to their refrigerators.

In the queer depths of his heart, Paul mourned the loss of an imaginary life he had not had the chance to live. One that grew up here and was entitled to call it home. He longed to be a part of the town in the effortless style of those authentic to it. He imagined friends he might have had, things they might have done in the freedom of the open wilderness that would have forged a different man than the one now sitting in his chair. If he had lived some other life. Gone by another name? Perhaps. But it would have been him still. Would he have the same parents? Yes. But changed like he was. He had to think up new lives for them, so that everything made sense.

It did not seem possible for anyone come so late to properly admit themselves. He felt shut out from their familiar graces. His address, or the quirks of its directions, would never be recorded in tattered notepads by the phone—not with his name attached, anyhow. The fast passage of cars on the highway seemed suspended across the long distance he had the vantage of from the window. Coming and going along the Bruce Highway, the shape of their family lives took whatever form of four-wheel drive or wagon vehicle they had chosen. For many of them, Proserpine represented a marker plotted somewhere in the middle of a familiar journey between places more distinct on either end. Something designed to be driven through. Years must have gone by for them, who only saw the front facing strip of motels and machinery sales and the inside of the service station bathroom...

"Very gracious of you to regret their lives for them." Diedre said once over tea.

Being pregnant gave her the moral authority on everything.

"I didn't mean it like that."

"We hadn't heard of this place before ourselves, remember?"

"Exactly. I feel that way about us. We didn't have our eyes open."

"You know there are plenty of towns like this? They're all over the country. I'm not sure what you think we've discovered. We had community back home. The Bakers invited us to church nearly every weekend."

"It was inside a shopping centre! The first thing they asked us was to donate money."

"And there's a fee if you want to play for the cricket team here."

He brushed the crumbs of Julie's slice onto the carpet. Careful not to attract pests? He had started double bagging every bit of waste at his own home in case of vermin. They would pour into his dreams after any crumb of sweet or savoury was left in the corner of his mouth. The cleaners here would sort it out for him. Local women who used their elbows for things. That was obvious in their regular film of sweat. It must have been an incredible strain for one so old... He was growing concerned he might have been developing a haemorrhoid. He spent too long sitting in the bathroom to pass the time. The blood in his sphincter had begun to feel heavy. He delayed all visits now until absolutely necessary to prevent more damage. He was warned by his early colleagues of the physical toll the service could take on a person: the fattening it caused, the diminished eyesight, carpal tunnel syndrome, a general bend in one's posture. It was happening to Paul like he never thought it could. People rushed into empty halls to take phone calls from their doctor. He could not help but strain to listen. He

knew of one woman who suffered from incontinence. Gout was surprisingly common. Recent newsletter read the obituary of someone's cancer. A dangerous amount of diabetes related paraphernalia was often scattered in the lunch room. Geoff Hardy consumed an entire chocolate muffin for breakfast every morning. His weight gain had been considerable over the last year, judging by the office photographs on a number of their desks.

During the fire alarm that morning, Geoff pretended to be busy with something critical, because he was afraid to take the stairs in front of people. It was for the best in the end. Once Paul signed off with the safety marshal, he had to climb the stairs behind Carmen Clare instead. She was one of the few women below thirty in the office. The light material of her dress pants was not form fitting, but she had a round shape that enjoyed the freedom of sway. Paul took opportunities to look as often as he could. He had practised carefully to detect the outline of her underwear in the correct lighting. He was pleased to find she wore a simple lace style that sat high on her buttocks. A sexual organism! It was not something the public service allowed. Nobody here was naked beneath their clothes. The long hallway beside his desk lead toward the stationary office, and she often had cause to walk along it on her way to the printer. Did she hide haemorrhoids of her own? Chronic thrush? What sound did her regular orgasm make? Aside from good morning now and again, Paul did not believe he had ever said a word to her.

By midday the sun was bright and Main Street burned pale outside. The same percussion keys that had been tapping since four a.m. would go on for hours until the day slipped away. It was a good way to get lost in time. You weren't wearied by the clock if you forgot to take notice. Paul decided to take lunch at the Metropole Hotel down the way, where he and Diedre often took tea when the cupboard ran bare. He found it unusually busy even for a Friday afternoon. On approach he noticed a large crowd of men through the lean-tos and over the footpath, they seemed harsh and loud and too secure in their own numbers, but he would have felt foolish if he deviated his path at all, and he went inside through the heavy curtain of cigarette smoke.

The dim lighting inside was made dimmer by the amount of people who consumed it. There was so much argy amongst them that went from table to table that it left the setting dishevelled and dirty as in the wake of a king tide that drags its slew of weed onto the shore. Decorative plants between the table grew from a compost of stubby caps and cigarette butts. Tables were askew and stools knocked over. The shrill laughter of unfamiliar women startled him. Paul gave way to anyone who ferried food or drinks by him in the crowd, he pressed his back up against the wall to make adequate room, but no one bothered to thank him.

The only vacant setting he could find appeared at the end of a long table next to the kitchen door, the table was empty except for the bulk of a young man in council work gear at the far end. Paul approached the opposite end of the table and pulled a chair out. He placed a hand on the table under a quick courtesy.

"You don't mind if I sit here?" he asked.

"Go for it."

Paul took a seat. The young man dragged the table to give him more room.

"Why does it seem so busy today?"

"Everyone is in town this weekend for the rugby carnival. They're all from around the area."

"The schoolboys? I read about them in the paper. I didn't think it was such a big deal."

"That's the one. They have a men's carnival as well. The school will play early tomorrow. These are probably all their dads. Most will probably play in the open age bracket. Everyone comes to town for it."

"Do you play?"

"Not anymore. I had to retire last year."

"You don't seem that old to me."

"I'm not. I broke my leg too many times. The same one. I had to give it away."

"Oh. I guess it was a shame."

"No, it's good. I was forever hurting myself. And I prefer to watch anyway."

The young man said his name was Taylor. He welcomed Paul to sit closer to him instead of shouting over the table. Paul was glad to. There was something about the roundness of his face and the spring of blonde hair that allowed him to fast trust him as a friend. The scent of his body odour politely muffled beneath his work clothes and the ample fume of deodorant was in that way earnest and masculine, and Paul felt good when they first shook hands and their grip was equally as firm.

Taylor had been the apprentice to the only greenkeeper in town, working contracts at the school and for the local cricket grounds on an informal basis, until recently signing on with the town council as a way to formalise his apprenticeship. It meant that he was now able to claim various welfares reserved for adult trainees, and he could complete components of theory at trade schools without additional costs, but it also meant he was newly divided between several masters, all of whom had an intrusive interest in his whereabouts and day-today.

"Smithy didn't want me spending too much time on the council jobs. But the thing is he never really cared if I finished a qualification or not, he was happy for me to take over from him once he retired. He meant well, but it's no advantage to me, you know? I work both on my own schedule now, as long as I keep up with everyone. I try get them all done by Friday so I can get down here early of an afternoon.

"I haven't seen you here before."

"I'm usually sat at the smoker's out the back. It's too full up today."

"You smoke at your age?"

"I don't smoke. I just prefer the company out the back."

When he drank his beer, the red colour of blush intensified on Taylor's cheek bones and whitened the dry skin under his eyes. It was clear that Taylor did not seem to mind his appearance in an unhealthy way like that. Before long, Paul had ceased to notice as well. He found himself drawn to Taylor's unusual brand of levity and optimism that seemed like something pulled from a beatnik's adventure novel.

After Paul had finished his lunch, Taylor took it upon himself to return from the bar with two pints to go between them, and Paul was unable to decline the gesture.

"They shouldn't expect you back any time soon, right?" Taylor asked.

"I work on my own. They wouldn't notice anyway."

"Is that up at the old welfare building you mean?"

"Well, they've done it up now."

"You know it was nearly condemned at one point?"

"I've heard a couple of times."

"I worked on it for a bit, man. It was when the new government came in they fixed it up. We started on the first day but the whole place was overrun by rats, like a total infestation. They had to fumigate the whole building, but they couldn't control for how many of them there were. They all got loose on Main Street—crawled through everyone's back dock or into the kitchens. No joke. We got them here at the Met too, they had to shut down while they cleared them."

Paul wiped the residue of parmigiana crumb from his mouth.

"I honestly can't bear to hear that."

"It's okay, they're gone now. We had dead rats on the footpaths for weeks. The crows came after that."

"And no one went insane?"

"I guess not. We must have dealt with them fast enough."

"They probably dug into everyone's houses."

"I've never had any trouble at mine."

"I keep hearing them in my roof at night, I think. Do you never get that?"

"It's probably just a possum, they can be loud."

"How on earth is that any better?"

The suds in his glass captured milky rays of sunlight below his eyes. It was getting so far on in the afternoon that the earliest starters in the office would be finishing their day soon. He would not be at risk of running into any of them here. He thought he should be getting back, but returning now would only seem stranger than if he were to call the whole day off, that way he could say he fell ill suddenly or that something went wrong.

The bar had filled up more than Paul thought possible. Other men joined them at their table after stumbling into them and being welcomed by Taylor who either recognised them or knew sons of theirs. Taylor was incredibly at ease with everyone and had at first introduced Paul to several of them, but he became more distant in the crowd of familiar friends as it grew larger, and Paul was now unsure of most their names. He continued to drink at an increasing pace and the men he had hardly spoken to continued to place beer in front of him—he protested and said he had not had the chance to shout anyone yet, but someone shushed him with a dispassionate wave of his hand and told him not to worry.

The weight of alcohol in his face made him feel old and overweight. Reflux troubled him, and his bowels began to disturb. But the incredible feeling of camaraderie between the men and the burly sort of joy it brought to his chest made everything feel full of life and colour again. It was such a contagious spirit. Antidote maybe? Dark spirits were good for staying warm. Beer kept up the right sort of attitude. His grip felt stronger. His penis was full and aloof at the urinal. He could wrangle the mutant rat of the wilds with his bare hands, if he needed to. Or anyone that looked at him sideways. One of the men spilled his beer down the front of his own shirt. They all laughed at him. He stayed on for the rest of the evening with the large stain down his stomach. None of them seemed to mind anything trivial the way Paul would have. He could tell by the raised gait of their shoulders that they did not bend or burden under foolish worries. Like Taylor and the cracked skin of eczema around his eyes. As blind as bats and the town drunk when it came to sad and pensive moods—and rightfully! they seemed to say. He was like that now. He felt like them. Now belonged. Before it got away from him, he thought he had better get up and—.

"You look a bit pale, Pete. Don't you spew on me."

"I'm alright" he said. He tried to grab the man's arm to steady himself.

"Get off the stool or you're going to crack your head open."

"I won't fall."

"Someone come get this cunt."

"He's alright, leave him" Taylor said.

Had been holding their attention in the middle of some tale.

"They stood me down for about two months so they could investigate" he said. "I don't know how formal the process was, really. I kept all my tickets. I could have gone and worked anywhere while they sorted it out."

"What's this you're saying?" Paul asked.

"I've just finished saying. Hold on."

"They don't hold you liable anymore?"

"They never really did, man. I was off with pay the first few weeks. They have their own process, you know. You would have seen it before with other jobs."

"You were off work?"

"Just for a bit"

"Why was that?"

"I'm sort of in the middle of explaining, Paul."

"He killed a girl, mate. Accidentally."

"Well don't put it like that."

"Christ! How on earth?"

"It was accidental. I flung a stone from my mower that hit this woman in the head. She fell on the road, and probably hit her head again, and she bled to death."

"You don't have safety checks on your equipment or something?"

"I just finished telling everyone. The council took liability anyway. They said it was their own faulty equipment. I'm not to blame. Smithy says it happens to just about everyone who uses a mower for work, he's hit a couple of people before as well, but they don't often die."

"You did though? Killed her? I can't get my head around it."

"It's lucky I don't want to talk about it then. It's in the past now."

"Did you go see her family or something?"

"No, I didn't."

"And what about remorse?"

"Remorse?"

"Yes! Do you feel any?"

"I felt bad about it. How about you?"

"I don't think I could live with myself."

"Well don't hold it against me, Paul. Leave me alone if it bothers you."

"Anyway, mate," someone said. "You weren't to blame in the end. It's nothing to worry about now."

She lingered in his mind's eye while they resumed. Dead in the sun. Collapsed on the rugged bitumen that made up most their roads. Her blood was frank in the daylight and tangled in her hair. No warnings of middle age had spelled anything like that to her. Maybe it was spring in her soul with many fetes still to come? Debris drove through it all. The brittle plate of our skulls was not really a match for anything if you thought about it.

He felt swept aside by the tide of incoming men. On the edge of their busy cluster. The remnants of his chicken lunch was still hours later uncleared by the wait staff. The wall of brawn and back and sweated t-shirt kept him at a distance from the table and the last dregs of his beer that teetered on its edge. He thought to reach between and take the glass back that threatened to fall with each vibration, but he sensed he had been forgotten in his day dream, while the rest of them closed in, and he felt more like an outsider (in desk clerk's clothing) than he ever had before.

There was something crucial he had not cottoned on to this afternoon, that was meant to be flippant and of an amoral fabric. Something the young man he had begun to consider his friend was an expert in. Taylor had forgotten him amongst the swell of tattoo scrawl and elbows swinging carelessly about. The psychic link to manslaughter doused by the warm urine of friends and family over the smouldering embers of a late campfire for the safest measure before departure.

"Taylor!" he called. "Taylor, I'm heading off!"

He couldn't see him. He peaked about their shoulders. Only the rest of them.

"Out of the way, mate."

"Some other time, hey?"

"Bye, mate. Good to meet you."

He exited the pub in a hurry. Dark now over the roads. Smithy said it happened to nearly everyone who worked a mower. How many times could you attend anywhere in serious contrition if that were the case? Guild of greenkeepers immune to any persecution. Hewing grass and stray pedestrians. He spat on the footpath. The ranks of the public service were held accountable for all charges levelled at them by even the lowest strata of tabloid. The way he spent his life answering to cunts. Key performance indicators plagued him worse sometimes than rat delegations under the swamp wire. To his own moral compass that felt the right to bleat so loud amidst such a life unived. What had forged it anyway except an ordinary set of parents and the variety programs of the public broadcaster? Remembered he had come to Proserpine determined to set out on his own far away from any conventional notion he had ever trusted like that!

Like the mollusc in the safety of its atoll, Paul was slow through the neighbourhood barriers that shielded him from the direct fumes of the highway. He listened carefully for the waves that crashed on the beach in the distance. Was it only cars passing? Exhaust vapours occasionally miscoloured the street lamps in the distance, but the salt smelled fresh on the air lately. High tide felt like something when you knew it was due. It was always trying its best to get out this way. The dried breath of the sea air rusted old fences like the stinking fog thick with coffee marred the interior of his windshield on cold mornings.

Taylor said he had been diving lately. He had friends who knew the way waters went off certain beaches nearby. He had pretended not to hear Paul when he asked if he could come along some day, and he pointed at the possum outside that crossed between the trees and the walls of the Metropole's mid-story.

"Look, see. Much better than rats, right?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't want either crawling above me at night."

"Possums don't multiply as fast. You get to know the one you have."

"It must be a worse feeling to exterminate it then."

"You call a ranger, Paul. They come and take them away for you. For god's sake. Do you just kill everything that wanders indoors?"

Wasn't he meant to? Pests carried diseases. They had a child on the way. He would have to come down hard on the world if he wanted to keep her safe. Mowers. Vermin. Tragic stories of leukemia he now blocked his ears during. Diedre was awake for him when he returned. She heated his meal and refrained from asking him where he had been. Someone had called for him that afternoon to let him know he had left his keys on his desk—they had put them in his drawer for him on Monday or else he could call the security afterhours and try over the weekend.

"You didn't mention about where I was?"

"I didn't even know."

"I don't really know what happened."

He fell flat over the weekend withdrawn from alcohol. Diedre expressed her concern, but the combined inertia of their lives allowed them to move on from it relatively soon. In some ways, he was glad at Sunday evening come early, and he put himself to bed directly after tea.

"We have to make sure we do something next weekend. We're not going to have time to do anything soon."

She had said that a few times lately.

"Next weekend I promise we will. Start thinking of something for us."

Paul arrived at work early on Monday morning in order to make up for the hours he lost on Friday afternoon. He drove to make good time. Almost no one was there at the early hour except the strange faces of the IT department. The sense of dread that invested in him most Monday mornings was gone once he was at his desk. The grey quiet of the week's first morning could be therapeutic in its simple method of administrative tasks.

Gaynor Welles was scheduled to return to work that morning. She had sat next to Paul for a short period when he first began in the office but had been away most the year now on bereavement leave after the sudden death of her husband. Paul was next to her when she received the news. She had been working at her standing desk, alternating her weight on each leg during various phone calls, when he saw her collapse under the weight of shock. At first, Paul thought her legs had simply given out—she was too old to be standing half the day—but the sounds she made while she writhed on the floor proved her physical health was in no jeopardy. He still brought them to mind from time to time out of some compulsive habit that remembered for him, just as he could not resist scraping iron with his fingernails whenever he visited a construction site.

Something stubborn had possessed her to return to work as early as possible. The customary process of grief felt too long for her, and she had already observed its potential to alter a person permanently who let it control them for any length of time. It meant enough to her that management agreed to humour her approach, and she was allowed back at her desk within a fortnight. Still standing for half the day. Blouse perfumed. Engage in full work duties—BAU as requested.

It proved to be a terrible decision. Gaynor was heavily out of sorts and dangerously morbid in her interactions with people. A hollow stare set deep in her orbitals managed to pierce the wafer sense of self they carried, and she began predicting the time and method of death for her colleagues in electronic memos scheduled for afterhours delivery. It was the sort of thing that frightened public servants especially. Paul had read somewhere about ancient villages that could catch themselves in contagious fits of dancing or never-ending laughter, some undetermined spark of queer behaviour that seemed to transmit psychically amongst tribes and had them stuck in a particular function until they inevitably died of stroke, hunger, or exhaustion—more recently, cults of wiccan ritual and suicide pacts amongst students at girls boarding schools were said to resemble this same phenomena of the mind. He thought Gaynor had brought them dangerously close to something like that before they finally managed to send her away.

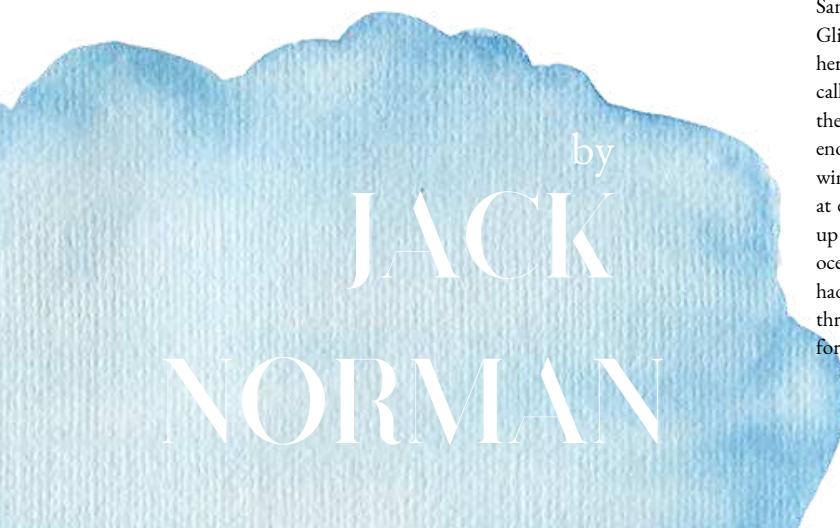
Her husband worked in the post office on the other end of Main Street. He died in an accident shortly down the way of their own neighbourhood, only an hour or so after she had kissed him goodbye that morning. By the time Gaynor was made aware, almost half the day had gone by, and it made her feel like a fool somehow that she had not known. They lived daily lives spent apart, two desks in their different locations, doing more or less the same work if you considered it seriously. In moments of clarity, she said it had come to her that she would have to do the rest alone now. No desk drifted elsewhere in the distant azure of billboard daydream that she could lay familiar claim to. Paul knew how much she had enjoyed visiting him on her lunch breaks, and noticed that she still took her breaks outside the building during her brief return, but he was not sure where she had been going...

Gaynor's certificate of long service had arrived at the office while she was away. It celebrated the twenty years she had spent in the same department (ignoring the several re-brands it had undergone). Some of the women felt it called for flowers and chocolates, especially timed so perfectly with her proper return to the office. A small group had placed the certificate on her desk against the glass placard that was engraved with her name and the date she began work. They decorated it by a circle of confetti and ribbon strip colours. They must have finished it Friday afternoon and left it sitting prepared for the Monday morning.

Paul found the arrangement completely obscene. He couldn't bear to look at it. What comfort, ever, was a reminder of time spent? Of time still passing! Didn't women like Gaynor disguise their birthdays? That courtesy lost in the fanfare. Were they going to announce her retirement for everyone as well when the time came? Probably. It was a tasteless exercise that served no purpose but their own desires to twist the hypnotic braids of dollar store tinsel. They looked for every excuse to decorate something here on the second floor. He found desks covered in birthday plastics and helium balloons every week of the year.

Before anyone could arrive, Paul slid the arrangement into the plastic bin by his desk. He stuffed her certificate and the placard in with the cellophane wrapping and the foil shell of her commemorative balloon. Downstairs, behind the office building, the wide alley way lead a long way either side behind most the businesses this side of Main Street, including the dock access behind the grocery store. The back kitchen of the Metropole Hotel was only a little further down the way. On the edge of the industrial skip, pigeons left their defecate all down the side of the metal frame and they scattered in different directions when he approached. The stink of soggy litter and wilted lettuce was thick and humid when he pulled the lid of the skip open. Without looking to see if anyone was watching, Paul tipped the contents of Gaynor's anniversary hamper into the bin and closed the heavy lid shut!

He had never asked a woman her age. Had never asked a man his salary. It was a human's right to keep their private shames. Language was always designed to be discretionary like that. He had to raise his voice at Diedre sometimes when she started rummaging through his past—or tried to parse the details through the unsteadiness of his eyes. What did you ask someone who had been to the doctor? Nothing serious I hope? Not cancer? Do anal fissures last long? Patients stony along the walls of the waiting room. They have all wished for the power to read each other's minds at some point or another. What about in general conversation, say? Where do you refrain then? Do you ever notice the way your son prances when he plays? When you fuck your wife how long does it take you to come? Paul thought of Diedre on the other end of the bed—he was satisfied, ashamed. Steady going until *that* was required on paper somewhere. Still some of our greatest secrets were public knowledge by law. The code to his own identity printed on the front of his car. Within weeks Diedre had found letters delivered from old charities that had followed them to their new address. And why on earth did they make you list your occupation on your child's birth certificate? He didn't want her to know that! He had his own mythology in mind. Supposed to be Hercules in another life if it wasn't her that called him here. Prince of Dol Amroth that has returned from the ancient crags of a different world. Incarcerated fathers got to say they had been on a government mission somewhere. Battles in Arabia. Arctic farers with the same Santa Claus who brought them gifts each year. Dead mothers were always better off in heaven. They saw everything. Invariable saints if remembered. The sane and living were forced to confess their spent ambition. Inscribed next to their name on the first issued certificate that could be discounted at fifty dollars. Thousands of clerks and administrators who have never had to call themselves real estate agents. They would fall to their knees in gratitude and kiss the soles of every client, prisoner, welfare recipient, pensioner, and child in care if required by design. Today marked twenty years for Gaynor Welles. Twelve years left to go for Paul Poer. He felt sure he would live to see that day. A rat the size of a record tumour approached the dumpster and sniffed after him. He began to jog inside. Terribly afraid. The phantom sense of it crawled along his skin. He would be early to rise on that day. In before them all. To sweep the clusters of foil into his receptacle, dispense of them, and spare himself the shame. Or did it mean he was he meant to try now for something else? He had come this far, but was still outfitted in the fatigues of his old life. Same dress shirt he had worn unironed in the sandwich stores of Coomera. Glint of courage that dwelt within his testicles. Last of it spent to create her? Was it west towards the bed of the evening sun then? Was that what called him? Rats bayed at the coastal dawn where food was rife. They had their backs turned to him in the mornings. Wives and children were loyal enough to go anywhere you asked. To go so far? And bring them? The wind of high tide came over the cane paddocks and the long blades brayed at each other. It was ice cold to breathe; unwarmth of total freedom. Fed up with the limits he had drawn. He gave himself over to the breath of the ocean wind, no song of wisdom that led him in that direction, it said he had to change, give over, and let it take him by the ocean alley stream through the grass and flooded fields, to bring them with him, trust in death for once! and ask to see what lies beyond.



by
JACK
NORMAN

RIDDLE OF THE WALTZING ELEPHANTS



At the beginning of

Part II of the episode concerning crass energy transportation systems in the early 21st century Americas, Andrew Shaughnessy, better known by the pseudonym "Donnedroid," or alternatively @berger_fries, narrates various discoveries and manifold implications found in the lobbyist reports released by the Secretary of the Senate's Office of Public Records and compiled on the watchdog site VisibleWhispers. Special attention is given to one particular transcript, which the podcaster, along with the anonymous though equally charming co-host, "Butterfly," @insectsinthenet, freely admits is the major source of inspiration for the entire course of these episodes and the recent thematic shift in the show toward uncovering minor deceptions undergirding national events. The following is an excerpt of the transcript read verbatim on air:

"I [Geronimo Beecham, federal government affairs representative for redacted petroleum refinery corps.] sat across from Jimmy Cohn Jr. at BLT Steak, right off Capitol Hill, long after the lunch hour had cleared out and the D.C. heat was in full wave, uncertain how I arrived here. I knew why I was to have lunch with a Mr. Cohn, but it was the wrong Cohn at the wrong restaurant at the wrong hour; I had a plane from Reagan International back to Toledo Express at five-fifteen, yet, I found myself wavering over second cocktails before the appetizer menu had even landed at the preferred five course restaurant of the dearest son and confidante of my intended representative right as the clock struck two-thirty. I had visited the office, I had made sure a brief but exacting memo was left. But my assistant informed me that plans had changed, Rep. James Cohn Sr. (R-TX) would be sending his son Jimmy to take me to "the best steakhouse in town."

I taxied to the address, not knowing what to expect. We seated, and as I began my introductory remarks, Mr. Cohn Jr. open palm-paused me to silence and launched into a dismissive tirade against "business before we whet our appetite" and the unnecessary of 2 such trite, though well-meant, niceties. It was well into our third cocktail (the middle of mine, olive pitbottom of his) that he made a peculiar suggestion unrelated to prior ramblings.

"You are about my age, yeah? Well, do you still dream?"

I was caught off guard by the specificity of his question and wondered whether or not its initial frankness might not be some grand strategy aimed at interrogation toward ulterior ends or a sort of opening of myself in order to better size me up and level me when it came to the Dakotas, the pipeline, and EE LP. Needless to say, I was cautious in my response.

"I don't think I do...every now and then...I'm sure I have to. REM sleep, I think it's called, is cluttered with dreams, but I can't remember any..."

"And over the greater span of your life, are there any dreams that stand out, that you remember from childhood or young adulthood?"

One sprang to mind. A movie franchise villain, not the main one, but the emperor behind the curtain, whose identity isn't revealed until several blockbuster iterations, spinning in a stormy air while I cowered inside of an aluminum bunker, lightning springing from his fingertips, cackling in the flashing dark. Of course, this was none of his business.

"No, not really."

My host seemed disappointed, if not a bit deflated, and I reminded myself of the whole point of my situation. I quickly recovered, "There is one image. I dreamed a lot of pools as a child. Not that I was afraid or unable to swim, I was a fish out of water, but for some reason I would dream of a lot of



blank space where there would be pools and a sort of ambient sound or white lights or..."

"Exactly. You dream of simple things. Very common."

Now it was I who found myself deflated.

"I have had a recurring dream," Jimmy Cohn began, "of the most marvelous thing you can imagine that absolutely nobody has shared." I could tell that he was not full of himself, he wasn't 3 bluffing, or at least he thought he wasn't, and he wasn't particularly red. A sort of clarity out of the formerly tipsy demeanor unpeeled itself as he declared his secret: "Waltzing elephants!"

"Like in a circus?" I naturally retorted

"No, nope. Not at all. I mean precisely what I say. Remove all pretenses. I dream about waltzing elephants."

He continued rabidly.

"Not cartoons, not sketches, not pale avatars or imaginings, but fully grown Africa savannah elephants joined together at the foot and hip, pirouetting in perfect time with each other like Bavarian monekys! Gray as the gravel it so rhythmically stamps into the ground. Tusks soaring out, sometimes clashing, other times crossed beautifully like mantelpieces or chandeliers. And in the middle of this procession is always one older, wiser, Mother Genesha of a beast sitting in the lotus position, of course, meditating until I dare approach."

"You approach these things?" I said in bafflement. I didn't dare take my eyes off him, but I became desperately aware of the shades of bodies in the room, had I been certain that barely anybody was left? Were there any other representatives who might overhear this insanity and take me for an instigator?

"Of course, I approach them. Who wouldn't? I denied your implications of carnival but ultimately it is a festival. Very inviting. Very excitable. Everything flowing very naturally. I walk through the pulsations and you know what sticks out to me? They are virtually floating. I do not feel the earth quiver beneath me as I step over the frills enwrapping them and make my way to the central mother. It's as if they are fish in an aquarium, though monsters in scale they may be. But I cross over and make my way through to the center. I assume the position, like a little idol. And the elephant opens her eyes, her long lashes batting at me with renewed life. And you know what she says? She says my name. James. Just like that. And she smiles. Her trunk rolls upward and out, tusks cutting toward the 4 skies. And she resumes looking at me. Not inspecting but maybe expecting. And when I don't know what to do or say she finally gives me a break. 'It lies where nothing lies and everything.' In the dream, it seems so profound



But now that I'm saying it out loud, I realize how much bullshit. Just something my mind invented on the spot, you see, because I expected that I expected something out of her which I knew was really myself but if it wasn't, if I had really dreamed up something profound and revealing and separate from me, it would definitely still expect something of me in return, if that makes sense. But the novelty of it, the whimsicality, can't be beat. I've had it three or four times now over the past six months. I look forward to seeing those elephants every time I lay down to sleep."

I found myself inept at a response, but the waiter intervened, and our meals were delivered almost instantly. No more cocktails, we barely picked at our food, luckily, I reintroduced business and Cohn gave me the anticipated affirmations of advocacy and agreement. We finished up and went out separate ways uncertain as to who absorbed the bill.

Back out in the open air, while waiting for my car, I watched him drive away in his private Mercedes, and thought it would be good to let my assistant know to send word back to the managers that this was a surety, our efforts would pay off. But I was interrupted by a call from the very same, and I answered it and was given the run down of events outside the BLT. Apparently, James Cohn Sr. had responded to my memo directly to the redacted office in Toledo confirming both his intentions with the upcoming legislation and his general advocacy of our business against any and all tides that might distract current Congressional oversight. I found myself wondering then why I had lunch with his son and why I had listened to his story about the waltzing elephants and the nonsensical 'Mother Genesha' that revealed nothing and evidently meant everything to this otherwise incidental (at least for myself) man."

At this point in the transcript, Beecham relates the extensive history of the actual legislative proceedings surrounding the EE LP regulations and the eventual overcoming of that tide that Cohn was 5 to play a vital role in negotiating and rallying for. What is not explained is the immediate after-effects of the renewed regulations and the immediate seizure of the funds necessary to construct the pipeline later subject to catastrophic ecological failure and the centuries first major eco-terrorist response. It is assumed Beecham knew all of this at the time of these interviews, yet no tone of involvement let alone self-indictment ever seeps through his bureaucratizations and oddly prosaic anecdotes of the kind just relayed. The transcript ends, as does the episode, for dramatic effect.

ARTHUR RAY



ON AMERICAN PSYCHO

You've known about American Psycho. I knew about it too, for a long time. Recently, a few of my friends and I watched a stream of the 2000 movie adaptation, starring Christian Bale. It struck a chord with me, that it was not just a slasher flick. The 1991 novel, which I shelved months ago, kind of stared at me from the bookcase, so I decided I'd read it sooner rather than later. After having read it, I feel there's a lot to unpack. First, three narrative voices take place in this story. Bret Easton Ellis uses several techniques I found interesting in his exploration of these voices. I'd also like to talk about intertextuality, some eisegetical comments, and the idea of Patrick Bateman.

The surface level voice of this story is that of 1980s fashion. Practically the entire cast obsesses over New York City's trends. Patrick Bateman, a Wall Street exec, proves an expert on many of these things: fitness, skincare, hair style, clothing, business acumen, movies, television, political stances, popular music, new electronics, high-end restaurants, business card formats, drugs such as cocaine, pursuing women and of course Donald Trump. All of these things are hip, and Patrick's friends ask him for hip advice frequently. The advice includes so much detail that I even found myself taking notes on exercise. Wardrobe tips over thirty years old still prove valuable, but some details about style have changed in the 2020s, such as the shape of mens' suits, accessories and haircuts. Bateman, in first person point-of-view, describes the clothing of his company in detail. The brands, materials, patterns and sometimes the price. His attention to these details even upsets him when he cannot see someone's shoes. He mentions the names of songs that play, luxurious food and alcohol, that he's pro-family and anti-drug, that he thinks Preston's joke isn't funny, "it's racist," the topic of *The Patty Winters Show* every morning, quick descriptions and crude banter on hardbodies and the neurotic reminder that he's in crocodile loafers by A. Testoni. He also reminds us that *The Patty Winters Show* topic was about Salad Bars only four sentences later; this tendency to repeat statements is deliberately unsettling, eroding this voice's credibility.

The psychopathic voice proves to be the most recognizable characteristic of the novel. Bateman's disregard for civility, indeed humanity, has offended many readers and attracted critics and book restrictions. Some early instances involve him cursing under his breath that he's an "evil psychopath," an apoplectic outburst on the poor quality of Pastel's *red snapper pizza* (because he's still upset by Montgomery's superior business card), as well as disgust with poverty, immigrants and homosexuals. At the video store a hallucination shows that the ceiling drips blood, and as Bateman restrains his trembling hand he tries to cut the tension by telling the female cashier about *Body Double*, a movie in which a power drill mutilates a woman. Further gory symbolism like a brioche which *looks like a big bloody sponge*, harsh language, brief anecdotes of violence and bigotry pepper the first third of the novel, but pornography gets the spotlight. Presumably, the pornographic rental tapes inspire the protagonist's obscene threesomes with prostitutes. Bateman's desire to get off makes him grow frustrated with condoms, but Courtney, one of his partners, assures him that he was "not going to feel anything anyway." That inability to feel underpins his depravity. A scene on "Tuesday" shows Bateman murdering a bum, and after this the remainder of the novel escalates the violence to a shocking climax. I must emphasize that the novel, once it sets the stage, does not pan away from porn turned torture; the longer paragraphs trap the reader in their horrors until the deed is done. Unless you skim past these sections as I almost did. The only person that comes close to relating to all this is U2's Bono, in a cowboy hat, who messages to Bateman at a concert, "I am the devil and I am just like you."

Underneath this leaning we find the sublimated voice of confession. Because Bateman cannot stop his psychopathy, he feels that confession is the only way out. This voice effectively begins at the halfway point of the novel in which Bateman restrains himself and warns Daisy. Such moments do not prevent him from subsequently murdering Paul Owen, a coworker who embroils him with jealousy. While Bateman pushes some women away, his anxiety sometimes reduces him to a nervous wreck. He fears that he may remain alone for life, all because of his depersonalization, his lack of emotions besides "greed and, possibly, total disgust." After his birthday he imagines that much like his victims, no one would notice his disappearance if he miniaturized, a meditation not unlike the psychopath Cathy from *East of Eden*. As the story progresses we see more idle threats in public, like when he squeezes a cashier's chin, telling her in a baby voice, "I like to kill people, oh yes I do, honey, little sweetie pie, yes I do." But none of these threats ever seem to bother anyone, often taken as humor if the words are not first reinterpreted from "murders and executions" to "mergers and acquisitions." In this way, Bateman tries to provoke someone to catch him and leaves the impression that he needs someone to stop him. With serial killers this often becomes a game. Despite his desire to face judgement, Bateman nonetheless evades Detective Kimball. I find the most clear confession segmented throughout "The End of the 1980s" where he admits he wants others to feel his pain. However, admitting this does not relieve him. It cannot change him and provides no help.

Before I move on to literary aspects, I want to point out a relationship between these three voices. I could feel the fashion dissolving away, revealing the psychopath and eventually the penitent son as the violence fades into obscurity again. The intersection between them all is New York's hippest restaurant, Dorsia. This restaurant has a reservation list that rolls out the door, generally prefers its patrons as the most affluent businessmen, celebrities and socialites—including Patrick's younger brother Sean, who already draws from a trust fund from their rich father. Despite Patrick's popularity in his circle of friends and his wealth, he cannot land a reservation and the maître d' laughs at him for even trying. Why does Patrick not quit his job and be like Sean, so that he might have a better shot at Dorsia? It appears straight forward. But to purchase freedom he must face his own emptiness. If he quit P&P he'd abandon his preoccupations, his clean cut executive work, exercise and endless appointments, the only things stifling him from losing all control. He begrudgingly admits to Bethany, staring directly at her, "I...want...to...fit...in." Having to admit this, now being twenty-seven years old instead of a youthful twenty-six, Bethany wanting to marry Dorsia's chef instead of him, these all mount a desperation in Bateman. He knows his psychopathy robs him of a much happier life, one barely out of his reach.



As a principle of rhetoric, when composing sentences and paragraphs, the middle lacks emphasis and the end gets the most emphasis. The pause at a sentence's end has a natural stopping point to reflect on the idea before the next; this is especially true in poetry, where a poorly chosen word can destroy the end of a line. To deemphasize the psychopathic voice, Ellis utilizes an interesting rhetorical arrangement: he places the psychopathic voice in the middle and ends with fashion. The scene "Deck Chairs" shows this clearly. First, Bateman's friends are staring appalled at his norm shattering suggestion that Diet Pepsi pairs better with rum than Diet Coke does. Without skipping a beat, Bateman describes to the reader the porno he watched, *Inside Lydia's Ass*, while on two benzos and enjoying a Diet Pepsi. He then says that Stephen Bishop's new album released and he bought all three formats, before finally answering his friends in the next paragraph. Although most of the example paragraph is spent describing porn, Bateman deemphasizes this by closing with music as if music is the thing he cares about more and porn remains inconsequential. This subversion repeats constantly throughout the novel. It has this effect where I look back on the clauses fetishizing violence and begin to protest, looking back and forth, that they're more important than a date at Café Luxembourg. This trick reminds the reader of the psycho's emptiness, casually transitions from what ought to be disturbing—as if nothing ever happened—as Bateman hides his own statements under a fashionable veneer. Because this occurs even in the absence of offensive statements, it appears as his method to center himself and that these offenses do in fact bother him. He fears that he is always on the verge of slipping into madness.

Sudden violence presents itself in various ways in the story. One way is through breathlessness. The lack of whitespace makes reading slow, cramming many words onto the page like a detailed portrait. These words cascade down the page without many thoughts to rest on for long. The chapter "A Glimpse of a Thursday Afternoon" starts mid-sentence, ends mid-sentence and has no line breaks.

An entire page involves Bateman demanding a cheeseburger from a kosher deli, a fruitless argument illustrating these overwhelming portraits of conflict. "Killing Dog," to a lesser extent, shows this in its last paragraph by hijacking an otherwise normal day with murder in broad daylight. Bateman can go from caressing a dog on one page and in the next the dog and its owner are dead, he's trying to whistle "Hip to Be Square" while eating cereal, bought with an expired coupon, out of the box before running up and down Broadway "screaming like a banshee," completely amazed by the imperceptibility, the unaccountability of his crime. In the chapter "Girls" involving Elizabeth and Christie, one paragraph closes during the girls' intercourse with Bateman. But the very next paragraph starts with Elizabeth running away, already bleeding to death. While the murder was inevitable, the passage remains shocking by virtue of its abruptness.

American Psycho includes thorough music reviews of Genesis, Whitney Houston and Huey Lewis. These chapters detach themselves from the story almost completely, but they do not merely serve as commentary on 80s music. The chapters that precede these three reviews, respectively, rise high in action: the mutilation of the bum in "Tuesday," the horrific revenge in "Lunch with Bethany" and "Thursday," and even the climactic sequence "Chase, Manhattan," the culmination of several brutal chapters. This means that Ellis uses these reviews as falling action, necessary breaks after psychopathic excess. Of course the review also serves as a high level mask (that aforementioned technique) but it looks more like Patrick laundering his bloodsoaked bedsheets as I'm still scrubbing away the mental image of Bethany's corpse. In the review for *Small World* by Huey Lewis and the News, Bateman pans the final song "Slammin'," which uses horns so irritating that "it set off something wicked" in him for days, a statement he echoes throughout the book as the expression of scorn for his unstoppable evil.

The climax in "Chase, Manhattan" shifts the point-of-view from first to third person. Patrick blows his cover when his silencer fails to suppress a gunshot, then he's on the run. No full-stops here, only ellipses bridge the paragraphs, and any question marks exist only to alter the inflection of the reading, just as italics function liberally throughout the book. In the middle of the fourth paragraph, indeed mid-sentence, our camera zooms away from the protagonist:

...and racing blindly down Greenwich I lose control entirely, the cab swerves into a Korean deli, next to a karaoke restaurant called Lotus Blossom I've been to with Japanese clients, the cab rolling over fruit stands, smashing through a wall of glass, the body of a cashier thudding across the hood, Patrick tries to put the cab in reverse but nothing happens, he staggers out of the cab....

The point-of-view does not return to Bateman until he enters the safety of his new office, where he leaves voice messages for his lawyer, admitting many of his murders. The reason for this shift comes from the idea that life is like a movie. This theme appears various times, from the slow cinematic sunset to the end of a dinner date in which romantic melodrama bleeds onto the page in Dolby sound. Gunfire, shattering glass and explosions in this chase push this movie quality into absurdity. Notice that the movie adaptation underscores its self-awareness when Patrick glances at his handgun, baffled at how it all worked out, as if he plays the hero. But he does not want to live off a movie script or talk like a commercial anymore. He wants off the ride.

The first epigraph Ellis gives us is the author's note from Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, followed by the suggestion that manners are restraints that stop us from all becoming murderers. I recalled Crime and Punishment briefly, and after Detective Kimball's entrance I began to compare the two stories. Kimball's not-so-subtle threats reminded me of Porifry Petrovich as he makes excuses for his sudden, allegedly accidental appointment and takes on a mocking tone as the conversation unfolds. Now Bateman fits the role of Raskolnikov by virtue of his cynicism, of hiding his crimes, his overwhelming sense of unworthiness coalesced with megalomania and—perhaps most importantly—his desire for confession, reformation, punishment or forgiveness. The secretary Jean, a young girl whom Patrick looks to for hope, would then fit the role of Sonia. A relatively more innocent and naive Sonia. I won't venture further than these similarities because I'd like to point out an important contrast. The key difference between the Russian classic and American Psycho resides in their endings. Raskolnikov not only confesses his crime to Sonia as a first step, and then to Porfiry for his punishment, but ultimately to God by faith for forgiveness of his sins. That final confession when Raskolnikov drops to his knees before the Christlike figure of Sonia still stays with me as an outstanding portrait of love in literature. Bateman does not get to do this. The prospect of marriage and children is left unclear, Kimball exonerates him, and in a final plea Bateman confesses his sins to the reader but feels nothing for it. The key difference in American Psycho is the absence of God's redemption. Patrick reflects on the pointless suffering in the world, making it all the more bizarre that he receives no punishment. But it is precisely in knowing he is a criminal that his suffering began. In the words of Raskolnikov, "if he has a conscience he will suffer for his mistake. That will be his punishment—as well as his prison."

What happened to Paul Owen then? Many theories might explain what happened, but I do not subscribe to the theory that Bateman isn't real or that he isn't a murderer. Paul Owen either remains alive or someone has swept his death under the rug—as a cruel joke, an April Fools from the universe, a kind of *diabolus ex machina* guaranteeing the show must go on. This absurdity resembles the America of Lolita in which many characters seem completely oblivious to HH's crimes. To me, Bateman is as it were in hell. His punishment is that he has no reformation, no ally, no forgiveness, no catharsis, no exit. To back up this theme, the opening line paraphrases Dante's Divine Comedy, fully capitalized, "ABANDON ALL HOPE..." and the ending I'd argue is from Sartre's No Exit, "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT," another depiction of hell. The planet was on fire, "and as things fell apart, nobody paid much attention."

While I do think Bateman is a living, breathing character in Ellis' novels, for a moment in the beginning I imagined that the character was designed from a premise: what if an advertisement became a human being? He sells himself so well at times, preying on the women he targets for a transaction of sorts. Not quite. The protagonist thinks that most people are this way. That civilization does not exist. No one is truly connected and people only care about the surface. And if we have anything inside, we can't feel it, we definitely can't relate it and there's nothing that can save it. When did he begin to believe this? Bateman claims he got this way at Harvard if he ever had humanity to lose in the first place. A far more subtle fear reveals itself through his family. Patrick recalls in "Smith & Wollensky" how one of his cousins raped a girl and bit her ears off, and how he used to ride horses with his brother Sean. Not long after in "Sandstone," a family portrait shows a young Sean and Patrick not smiling. Their father is pictured wearing a suit by Brooks Brothers, "and there's something the matter with his eyes." Was his father a psychopath too? Was he also on some kind of medication, perhaps the effect of a transorbital lobotomy? These things fuel a fear that Patrick has a genetic tendency to evil, that the son inherits the sins of the father.

On the internet, Patrick Bateman as played by Christian Bale remains an icon. His doubles advocacy campaign proved one of the most enduring messages spanning over a decade. It proved so pernicious that it became a bannable offense if not impossible to witness on some message boards. He has continued to review modern music (primarily through YouTube) and he is still humble enough to admit, even on vacation in Asia, that he scarcely believes he is still a misogynist to this very day. People still gather to watch the movie adaptation, as I have. They read his recommended novels such as Doctor Zhivago and Farewell to Arms. Many look to Bateman as a rolemodel. Some as the man they want to be, others as the man they already are, but always the man in whose aphorisms they find truth. I have learned off-hand of someone that comments with Patrick as an avatar on social media—using his real name—and only replies with quotes such as, "Nice." It is a kind of post-ironic association that continues to spark outrage among detractors who fail to see the value in the lamentations of this modern Jeremiah. His pessimism towards society stems from a desperate hope that people ought to be more than M E A T. More than anything in the world, Patrick Bateman just wants to be loved.

It's often said that we don't read. Even more that we don't write. This should not stop you from checking out the novel even though the movie faithfully captures the spirit with some necessary abridgement. Then you can say with certainty, to all your internet pals, "*the novel was better.*" If you haven't experienced American Psycho in either format; I urge you to check 'em out.





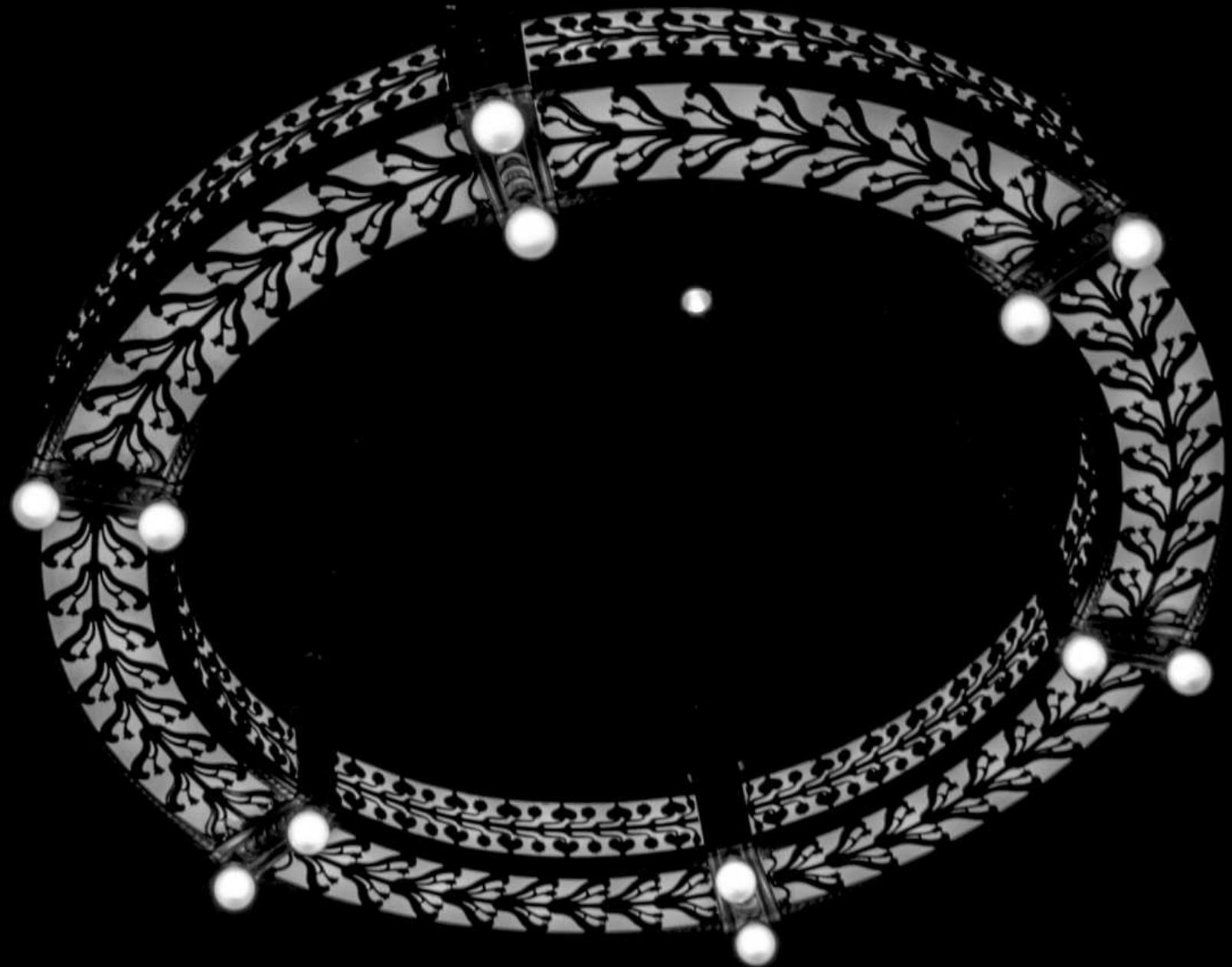
Spring had awoken and Easter was near,
you ran out your front door in a hurry.

When we met in the park you were not dressed for snow —
we were caught right off guard by the flurry.

The air was an eiderdown ballet,
the dancers were trembling wisps.
The flakes swept through frantic parabolas,
our hearts beat apart in their midst.

So I pulled you close and between us
we baffled the winnowing breeze.
Yet as I quenched my eyes in the milk-white sky,
you said 'come' — you were worried you'd freeze.

But then you looked up and loved the blankness too,
and you pressed up tight and my warmth spread through.

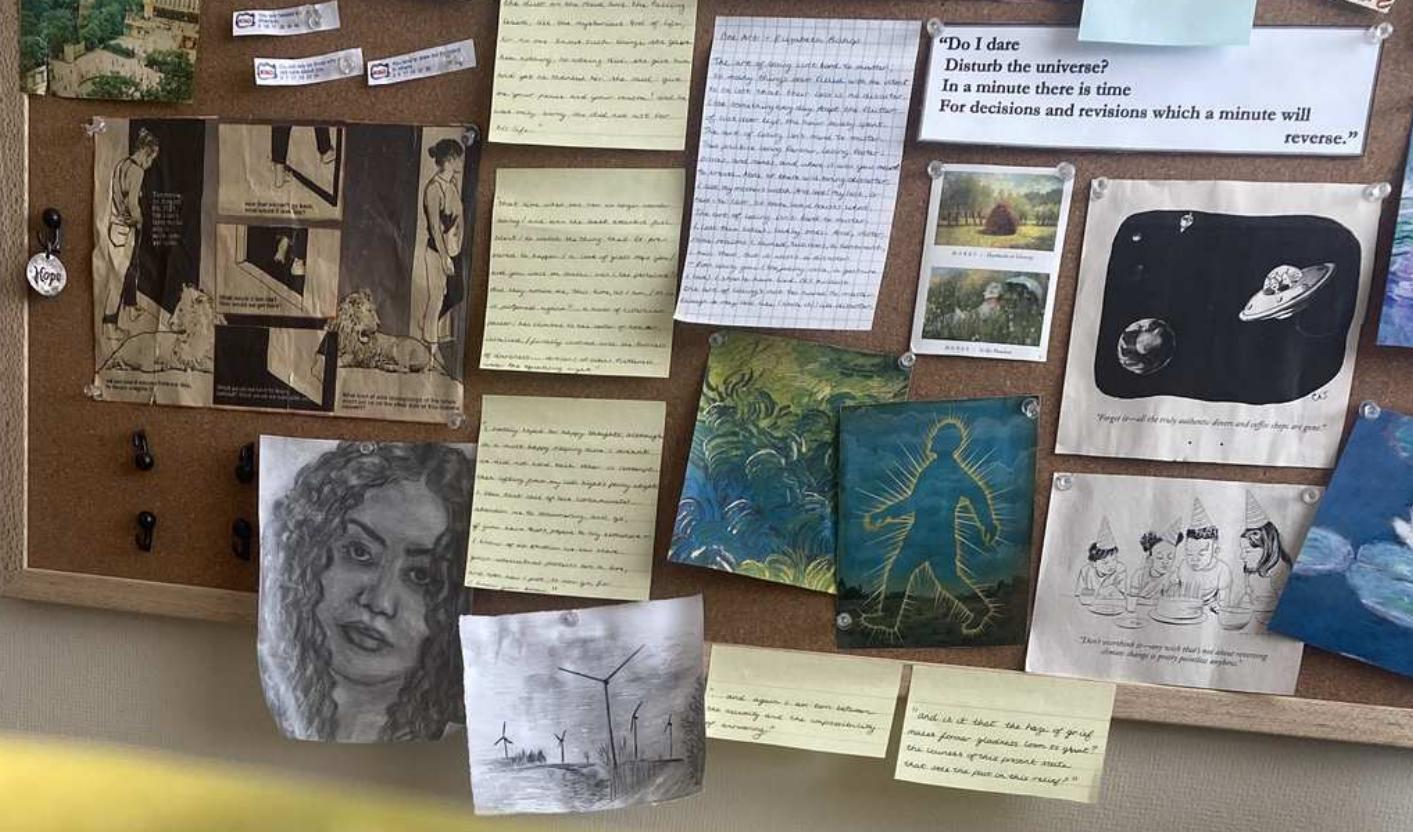


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stop saying I'm not all right in the head I was never crazy before this happened Im not melville I need to talk to ari because I can't get calm and he won't talk to me it's not fair he reported me on sundayfor posting the screenshot of what he said and got me banned for three days because he just wants to silence me pretend that he did nothing wrong and none of this is happening because he can't bebothered what did he say to you about mewhy does he get to lead me on for fun and break my heart and say the cruelest things possible about me and talk about how he found it so funny that I was crying over him and then decide he doesn't feel like dealing with what he did so he's not ever going to speak to me like after I was out of the hospital in December i emailed him saying can we talk about what happened and he agreed we could talk and said I could send him my thoughts but then he never responded so I emailed him again in January saying please respond and telling him I couldn't stop thinking about what happened and i had been feeling really anxious and I had a panic attack in the library because I kept thinking about the mean things he said and I just really needed to talk to him so I could get closure or even if he changed his mind and didn't want to talk anymore i needed him to just reply briefly to confirm that so I would know becayse the uncertainty was really upsetting me and then the next day after I sent that email to him he literally called the cops to invade my apartment with their guns and mock me and say im delusional and threaten to arrest me for criminalharassment if I ever contacted him again and they humiliated and belittled me in front of my roommate while I stood there crying in my pyjamas and said I'm crazy and should take my meds and be in the hospital and they I was so scared and crying like he knew I would never hurt him or anything I never threatened him ever at all even once or said anything bad I was just upset and asked for closure but he just called them to come terrorize me because he didn't give a fuck and didn't feel like even trying to deal with it himself first like it was toomuch effort for him to even make an attempt to talk to me or at least send me a once sentence email letting me know he didn't want to talk anymore before taking the step of literally threatening to have me arrested I can't get calm I'm So tired nothing makes sense and I can't stop thinking about it and I cry for hours every day like he was the one who agreed we could talk and then couldn't even be bothered to tell me he'd changed his mind but everyone thinks I'm crazy all I wanted was closure becayse the things he said about me were playing in my head over and over and it wouldn't stop hurting why does he get to go use me as a practice girl and then go have his own life and have a great time and get confidence abd I have to lose everything I literally cry for hours every day



*"Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will
reverse."*

Hell **ON WHEELS**



by LUCAS
BINEVILLE

Towers, terrible and radiant, hued in neon green and pink, pierced the starless night sky. A swarm of helicopters blinked behind the skyscrapers. Below was the dank urban depths of corporate mascots and gang tags coloring the decaying city. A city lingering beyond the end of the world. All the worst civilization had to offer, a dam held together by string and Scotch tape, clustered together amid canyons of steel and concrete. At the edge of this city, where metal vents spewing mist ended and arid terrain began, were two men and a jeep. The rear of their car to a hunk of clay protruding from the earth.

Ahead—the worst civilization couldn't stomach.

"I swear these wings are gonna be the death of me," groaned the delinquent in the passenger seat. "Woof! I get these every week and I always forget how sick they make me afterwards! It's got to be all the sauce they put on them. Can't stomach it but so good, man."

Will's favorite food was prime rib. Bloody. More rare than rare. But he was poor so once a week he gorged on chicken wings. His only proper meal each week. The meat was most likely synthetic. Yet it was the sauce he always figured made him nauseous. Overall, there wasn't much meat on Will himself. He was a malnourished creature. Boney and his own sauce was the gel combing back his pale hair. His leather vest hung on him loosely while the thickest item to his name were the glasses clapped to his narrow face.

"Every week you eat the same crap and every week I ask you why," replied the driver in his usual bored voice. It took a great deal to awaken Carlo from his shroud of ennui. The man of perpetual disinterest in whatever was going on around him. Even when excited it was never easy to tell. The hand-me-down military jacket he wore was faded and stained. He couldn't be bothered to wash it. Not even to honor the brother who perished in it. He looked to the rearview mirror, seeing his empty eyes between the dark bangs above and the darker bags below.

"I already said why," Will said before taking another bite of the wings that had so often made him ill.

"It'sh cause they're sho' good. They're worth it, mm!"

"Man, they're frickin' mild," Carlo said. His dark eyes glaring at the semi-truck cruising into the city. A dry stretch of land separated the backroad eating the truck and the quiet interstate they were presently stationed beside.

"I like my wings how I like my women."

"Uh? With cocks to put in your mouth?"

"Spicy and hot," Carlo said, ignoring the bant, "so much it puts tears in my eyes. Should be a fight just to taste them."

"Wait," Will dropped the bone into the box on his lap. He reached for the tall, fruity smelling can of strawberry energy in his coaster, took a swig, and suffered a cough.

"Don't know why you like that liquid estrogen either."

Will ignored that, "So you're telling me you like your wings hot? Like really hot, right?"

"That's how wings are supposed to be. They should—" Carlo stopped when a car drove by from the hunk of earth blocking their view of the city. The car was followed by another pair in each lane and he tossed up his hand for Will to continue his thought.

"Yeah, I know, I get it," Will said. "Anyone that likes spicy food, it seems to me, loves getting their tongue burned into the back of their head. I mean, I don't even think it's about flavor. I don't know, dude, I don't like spicy foods, but—"

"People like the flavor, man."

"I'm making a point, asshole. It's the same deal with me and my go-to wings. We—as in you and any other moron that likes eating raw chili peppers—we both like the food, right? We both like it, and eat it, despite getting our asses kicked by it. I get hung over from the sauce. Your brood gets a face full of tears and snot."

Will took up one of the remaining wings soaking in the back of the box. "You know, maybe wings are just garbo," he paused on that thought for a moment before resuming his meal.

Carlo looked out his own window, "You're an idiot."

Will was too busy eating his wings to reply so after a time Carlo went to check his phone. "Nate's doing his bonfire tonight. Asked if we wanted to drop by." Just when Will was about to break and vent about how much Nate drove him nuts for some new reason this week, Carlo spotted another bit of news on his phone. "Oh, hey. That accident downtown is trending."

"Thought bad news was supposed to be censored," Will said. "Actually, I thought I heard some helicopters a few minutes ago. Must be a whole show then."

"It is. Some kind of chemical mishap. I guess the harbor is on lockdown."

"Mm," Will took another bite out of his wing, "get the scanner off local."

There were many features in the vehicle Carlo and Will were sitting in. Features installed by Carlo's hands and Will's twisted imagination. Carlo worked at his father's mechanic shop at the other end of the city's limits. He wasn't very enthusiastic there, nor ambitious enough to pursue any other career, but the machine they were inside of was proof of his technical abilities. One nice feature—which was rather customized and particularly illegal—was the city-wide police scanner installed between two screens and below the radio.

Static followed the twist of the dial and then: "10-4. Sending additional emergency vehicles to Roger's Street. Sixteen, stand-by. Reports coming from the ground that there are casualties being found outside the plant now. Going to need peace officers to secure the exits on blocks beta through eagle. Nineteen, what's your 20?"

"Still at the plant entrance. Currently engaging with civilians attempting to breach the lot in front of the plant. Apparently they think there are people still inside and were trying to conduct a rescue. Crowd's growing. Requesting reinforcements."

"Nineteen, they're already en-route. You can begin detainment."

"Copy. Over and out."

Carlo returned the scanner to the local channel while Will went for a swig of his starberry. He swallowed his drink and whistled. "Sweet," he smiled, "we got Chernobyl radio."

"You'd think everyone would be racing to get out of here."

"What? You think people would be rushing out of the city and heading out to—where exactly?" They both looked to the road ahead leading into the night veiled horizon. "You know what's out there. You know what it's like when you take that road too far."

Carlo did. He roamed it for a miserable spell once before his family settled. The truth was—ugly as it may be—outside the cities it was commonly agreed to be hell on the road. Little law enforcement at the limits of cities. None whatsoever once the city sank beneath the rearview. Cartels doing the devil's work and motorcycle gangs thinking they were Vikings in Valhalla. From time to time other strange or gruesome rumors. The cities were bad for all the crackdowns, martial law, and taxes. But Carlo knew how bad it could get when all around was a broken road from one end of sight to the other.

That's why their location was the perfect sweet spot for their hobby.

"Up!" Will cried as a lone car exited the city.

A second later another rustier car lagged out from behind it, "Ah, never mind."

He rolled his head back into his seat, "Shouldn't take this long. This blows, tonight's perfect for it if all the police are busy at the harbor."

Carlo didn't add anything to that thought so Will made him pay for it, "You think Alyssa still goes to those bonfires?"

"Man, don't even start."

But Will had already begun, "I've told you before? I had her at my apartment, shoulder to shoulder, watching some horror flick I can't even remember."

"You've told me," Carlo said through a sigh, desperate for the main event of the night to begin already.

He was more interested in the coyote chasing the rabbit down the road. That show ended when the coyote stopped to jump at something unseen amid the rocks.

"Oh, did I tell you about this one other time? She came over again and I got a kiss on the cheek. That was it though. Now she's engaged."

"Should've went for it." He was half talking to the coyote which had vanished into the night.

"Bro, I couldn't bang your ex. That'd be weird."

Carlo gripped his steering wheel tightly. Considering his ex had stalked him and cut his name into her arm—an awkward explanation for the fiancé that must have been—he never cared for Will trying to make the memory of her weirder. But Will certainly did.

"Ah," the passenger with the box of bones in his lap moaned, "what a shortstack she was. I seriously need me a goblin, man, I'm going to die without one."

Carlo slowly turned his head to Will who was lost in the machinations of his own dirty mind. He was almost about to say something when a car left the city. Carlo shook his head back.

A little red car. Economy. A few seconds passed by. No other car followed it out.

Will leaned forward, "Show time?"

Carlo started the engine up. "Show time." Giddy, Will put the box of sauce slathered bones on the car floor and shoved them under his seat. He took one last sip of his drink then clapped his hands together and rubbed them excitedly as their vehicle entered the interstate. "Show time!"

Dust rose from their nook in the rocks. The little red car was a ways down the interstate. It never took long to catch up. The two had been at their outback passtime for a while now. The equipment necessary for their hobby was nothing shabby though looks could easily deceive. An ATV Jeep Rhino, heavily modified, tailored to the inhospitable wastes it was now roaring on and racing across. It was never seen during the day but if it were one might think they were seeing an old military car that had been vandalized by street punks. In essence—it was. Rebuilt and repurposed, heavily armored and painted black, agile on rock and road. If it didn't drink gas like an alcoholic on a Mardi Gras bender, Will would boast it was perfect. Of course, this large and boxy army car didn't look perfect. As the driver in the red car would be thinking right about now—as the ugly, metal box fell behind it in the right lane—it seemed as if it strolled out of the scrapyard. Graffiti across the sides and hood suggested the vehicle was not only unloved but bathed by malice. Looks were deceiving, however, as Carlo put a lot of love into his masterpiece. Though there was still malice at play.

'PEACE EATER' was written in large, white text on the hood. What it meant neither of the young men knew but Will thought it sounded cool. 'STEP ON IT' was written on the passenger side door in red. 'You forgot your wallet' could be read on the driver's door.

'How's my driving? Call 666' followed by seven skulls resided on the very back. Below that—a coexist sticker.

idea the catharsis his second son found in destroying cars rather than fixing them. Nothing else really made Carlo feel good—certainly not Alyssa. This was the game the two played for the last few years. A game played outstandingly undisturbed. Tonight, knowing the harbor was swarmed by police fighting a disaster, they saw the desert as theirs. No risk of the odd lone patrol, never before encountered. No risk of a militia pooling out of Tin Town far off behind them. Tonight they had the game to themselves, however they wanted to play it—and play it they did.

"Let's crank it up a notch," Will shouted and swung the radio on and allowed The Unwreckable to reverberate with loud punk rock. The game went on and took them out into the waste. Again and again the Rhino beat down on the tiny, increasingly damaged car. Smoke was just beginning to leak from the back of the car when Carlo misjudged his timing. He got his tenth or twelfth hit in but was too far back and the red car spun while they sped off the road.

"Hey-hey-hey! What are you doing," Will shouted as he watched their broken toy back on the road turn around to take off. The dust was still raining down on them off the road.

"Dude, they're getting away!

Come on, they're getting away!"

"Chill out, I got this," Carlo said, spinning The Unwreckable's wheels and returning to the interstate. The game was never over until Carlo wanted it to be over. Over 100 mph. A distance remained between the red car and The Unwreckable. On the chase went, the gap slowly being closed, yet a tension was rising in Carlo.

"Faster, man. This is taking forever."

"I'm going a hundred over."

"I know—hurry it up!"

"Will, I don't know."

"What? You can catch up if you actually step on it!"

"It's not that," Carlo shook his head, eyes locked on the craggy and cracked road.

"We don't usually go out this far. They either head back or take a side road by now."

The game was over when Carlo wanted but the game was racing out of bounds.

"Hey, speak of the devil—look!"

The smoky banged up car, a small light down the road, turned suddenly onto an adjacent country road.

Will was laughing when the red car was already returning to the right lane upon seeing them taking to the left. This was where things began to get heated. Where the first flavor of thrill, battered in the anticipation of what was to come, took its hold of the two men. That delicious moment where they each swore they could feel the driver before them becoming aware of the situation they were in. Both cars were back in the right lane, each pushing 85 mph. Almost enough to rip through time like in that old movie, Will thought.

It was Carlo who spoke next though, "Hang on, forgot the brights."

He switched the brights of The Unwreckable's triple layered headlights. Carlo had to shut one eye and squint the other as a flash of light washed over the red car. Will choked on his starberry as a laugh caught the better of him.

90 mph now. Faster than that car from the old movie. It was too bright for even the driver of The Unwreckable. Carlo shut the brights off, the red car was visible again to them, as was the car's right blinker.

"They're gonna pull over," Will cried. "What a pussy! They think they can just pull over!"
"No they can't."

Pedal to the metal. *THUD*.

The Unwreckable kissed the bumper of the red car like a crack of thunder. It swerved in the next few moments after, the driver surely scrambling to process if what just happened was real. The two cars blasted their way down the road which was becoming worse by the mile. Great landmarks of baked earth forming ridges and plateaus blurred by their windows. A second thrust left its mark on the back of the car. Now the driver had to know it was no accident before. There were no straws left to grab at. No lies to whisper to themselves that this was all just a series of accidents culminating in a misunderstanding.

No.

The dark one-way windows of The Unwreckable—with the tag of 'STEP ON IT' on the door—came into view. The driver of the little red car could not deny the danger they were in. RAM. The Unwreckable slammed into the car, knocking it off the road for a dusty moment. A dent found its way on the door of the red car, a crack carved up the window obscuring the view of tonight's victim. This was it.

This was the hobby of the two psychopaths in the Jeep Rhino.

"Again, again, again! WOOOOO!"

Will didn't consider himself a psychopath. In fact, he considered himself to have a good sense of character judgment. It came with working retail. He knew the crazies from having to deal with them. The shoplifters, the liars, the maniac that dosed herself with piss in the kid's clothing section. Yes, he wasn't crazy. The people he serviced everyday were. And with a job like his, no better than a clerk in a psych ward, he saw this hobby as a deserved release.

WHAM! Y-E-E-E-E-E H-A-A-A-A-W

Carlo just smiled. Will liked to holler and hoot like an idiot, getting some sadistic kick, but Carlo just liked the chase. *THUD!* And it always felt good to bump a puny car trying to get away from him. By day he sweat and bled for the family business. His father was so sure he was on the straight and narrow unlike the other son who went and died for a gang. Yes, he thought Carlo could be lazy, but he had no

"Your seatbelt on?"

"No, why..."

Spinning the steering wheel, The Unwreckable went back off the road, slamming Will abruptly against the door. Though Will added a chorus of cussing to the angry rock on the radio, Carlo was preoccupied smashing the rocks under the wheels of the jeep. The Unwreckable bobbed up and down over the terrain as it cut through the stony field, making its B-line for the car.

Whether the contestant of Will and Carlo's game saw The Unwreckable coming, neither were certain.

But in the last seconds pending the great impact they knew the finale was at hand. Will, finally buckling up, grabbed at the handle on the ceiling and put his other hand to the dashboard. Carlo donned his sly smile.

SMASH!

As satisfying as a bowling ball getting its strike. Carlo had cut through the open land and delivered the finishing blow to the smoking car. Smashing it by the side, the red car was sent rolling across the road, far off into the next field. Singing a song as violent as the lyrics on the radio, the car rolled and crashed on.

The Unwreckable sat triumphant, devouring both lanes of the slim road. Will laughed and Carlo admired the art of the car settling on its roof. It nearly decided to do one last roll but gravity brought it back and the car sat still.

"WOOH WEE!" Will was already unbuckling his seatbelt. He never wore it long.

"Oh my God! Nailed'em! Nailed'em right to the cross HAH H-A-A-H! Alright-alright! Let's see some fire! I want fireworks! Fireworks-fireworks-fireworks!"

Rather than the explosion Will was asking for, the slender hand from earlier-now a bit bloodied and bruised-clawed itself out of the broken window of the upside-down car. Soon the hand pulled out from the car a battered body like a bunny from a burning hat. Long blonde hair swayed off the top of the body as it managed to stand. A breeze made the torn, beige coat around the body dance while blood dripped from unseen wounds.

"Up! Still alive! Woah-woah-wait," a thrilled look lit up on Will's face.

"White woman! Oh God it's a white woman!" At this point the woman was limping away from her totaled car and heading off toward the unknown of the night. Carlo pursued-slowly. "WHITE WOMAN." Will shouted again, "AAAHHHHHHH!" He was slouched down into his seat, mimicking a seizure, and yelling like a child. Sometimes the game didn't end with the destruction of the victim's vehicle. Sometimes the driver scrambled out of it and tried their luck on foot. Yet they were out in the middle of nowhere. In fact, they were deep on the reaper's own turf. Staggering off the end of his scythe. Nowhere to run, Carlo crept The Unwreckable up to the sluggishly, fleeing woman. Her sobs muffled by the roars of the Rhino.

Somehow Will had lost interest in the affair. He shut the radio off, pat his stomach, and sighed, "Ack, I think the wings finally caught up with me. Whatever happened here we already missed it, man. I bet there was some kind of big-time drug deal or something and they had to burn the ride as evidence. Damn, or maybe like they drove out here with a body in the back, some important government agent, and then they set fire to the whole thing. God, I hope it's that dandy councilman."

While Carlo couldn't explain it, and as much as the burning wreck gave him chills, he knew there wasn't a body in there-and then the headlights turned on.

He had caught it by the corner of his eyes. Before he could rationalize how the lights were on, Carlo's head snapped to his side, and sensed the burning car was about to meet them. On instinct, he drove The Unwreckable forward, barely managing to keep it from falling over the edge of the rock-let alone dodging the incoming, fiery car. The Unwreckable skid near the center of the plateau. Will cried out yet more curses, and the burning car sat at the edge. "Give me a warning! What the hell was that for?" Will cried, rubbing the back of his neck. Carlo meant to answer until he noticed he was breathing rapidly. He knew in his racing heart he had dodged the car at the very last second. Will saw his demeanor before discovering what had happened, "Did-did that car drive forward?"

The SUV continued to burn, though now its engine added life to the crackling fire. Directly before it, over the drop to the earth below, its beams of light pierced the air. "How did it do that," Will asked, his voice deprived of all his previous energy.

"I-I-I..." We shouldn't be here, Carlo wanted to repeat.

"Hey! Answer me! What happened?" Will twisted his body around, in search of who else might be around. "Someone out there? How'd it do that? How'd it turn on like that? Carlo, the thing is a smoldering wreck! How did it-"

Unthinkable. Carlo watched in awe as the car, worthy of a junkyard funeral, sped back in reverse and once again faced The Unwreckable. Funeral. That was a word that echoed suddenly in Carlo's head.

Funeral, he thought, as Will faced forward to grasp with the reality burning before them. Again, the burning car launched itself toward them.

Once more Carlo drove out of the way. This time he applied his brakes to skid and keep the front of The Unwreckable in clear view of the fiery car. The lit car in front of them did the same. Like two worlds in orbit of one another-a yin and yang atop the rock-they skid in a clockwork circle amid a cyclone of dust and an orange glow. Gravity reeled the burning car closer to The Unwreckable as they circled each other-like two beasts staring down the other at the watering hole-and Carlo blinked. He let off the brake and drove forward, bouncing down the gravely way.

Carlo wasn't pleased to be so far out in the wastes but he compromised on his worries-there was just that much more leeway. For a short time, The Unwreckable revved itself up to the very heels of the despairing woman. Like a beast about to bite down on a wounded animal then faking out at the last second. What hope could she have, Carlo wondered. What miracle did she expect to find at this point stranded in the land of the dead?

"Ah, finish this up," Will said once Carlo gave the woman some ample space, "go make some pancakes. Twenty points. Maybe we can head back and try...the hell's up there?"

It took a moment for Carlo to break away from his fun and to match where Will was looking. He was looking out his own window. There was a land formation not far away. Hardly a plateau. A slope of gravel hugged the formation's east side. An orange glow coming from atop it.

"You think that's Nate up there? I thought he would have just taken behind Joe's again. He wouldn't have come out this far. Would he?"

The two looked at one another before Carlo made the decision to abandon the woman limping off toward the great graveyard of the wastes. The climb up the elevated chunk of earth was no trouble for The Unwreckable. As the jeep drove up the formation, the two were greeted by the eerie sight of a burning car. Sat in the center of the rocky plateau, a once silver vehicle cooked from the inside, a viscous fire spilling from its blackened windows and sunroof. Its headlights were off and only the fire, great as it was, illuminated the area. Carlo curved around the edge of the formation-the woman below still in view as she ran off into the night-and the Unwreckable parked directly ahead of the front of the burning car.

"What's it doing up here?" Will asked as if Carlo had an answer.

"I don't know. I don't like this."

Will turned down the radio. "Cartel work? I think I saw a movie like this but I don't remember the name."

"Who cares. If it's on fire then somebody else is out here."

Will looked away from the inferno atop the plateau and tried to find where their limping girl went, "Yeah, but like, whose car is it? Might be like what we do, man. You see like a body in there?"

Carlo studied the fire that hummed within the interior but seemed too timid to reach over the hood of the car.

"No. No remains in there. It's an SUV though. New. Or, well, was new."

He broke his stare from the strange sight and itched his nose.

"We shouldn't be out this far, man. This is that weird stuff you hear about out in the wastes."

Carlo returned to the interstate with a sharp skid. Just a straight-line home, he thought, "I don't know what that thing is but I'll get us—" It got them again before whatever Carlo's best hopes were. Making no turn like they did, the burning car went straight on with enough force to leave a new dent on the driver's door—and a cratered wound at the tip of Carlo's bitten off tongue. Embers flashed over the windows and the Unwreckable was thrown off the road.

A gush of blood was spit from Carlo's mouth, splattering his chin and adding fresh stains to his jacket. He tasted the sweet iron when he swallowed, the pain flaring behind his lips, the sensation of holding a burning piece of coal in his mouth. Yet it was Will, face looking like a cut of prime rib, who said, "I think I'm going to be sick." Carlo could not afford to glance his way and the pain kept his teeth wired shut.

No road to outrun on, The Unwreckable carved its way into the unknown off of the interstate. The best illumination belonged to the devilish chariot sizzling all the dust coughed up from the jeep's wheels. And the light was getting brighter.

"Shake'em! Shake'em already," Will was in such a frenzy of fright his voice cracked. The pain of his runny, split nose hadn't even gripped him yet.

"I'm—trying," Carlo grunted through his gritted teeth. He could feel the crimson liquid oozing from his tongue begin to wedge and wetten through his teeth. He felt like he was at the dentist, ready to be told to rinse. Will was already on that idea.

"I'm gonna hurl..."

"You better not," Carlo said, opening his mouth to speak and letting a fresh splash of blood fall to his lap.

Up until this moment, Will had a strange fear layered over the overt threat of a burning car chasing after him. A fear that whispered coldly in his ear, 'don't let the car see you, Will! Don't let it see you in your seat!' But what consequence would follow being clearly made out in his seat he didn't know—nor was he certain exactly what in the car would be able to see him. Yet now he saw the flash or red and heard the sound of liquid splattering. He looked and saw Carlo's bloody mouth and the terror unfolding around him was spiced with yet another hot ingredient.

"D-dude, you alright? You're bleeding."

"Bit-my-tongue," Carlo again said through his teeth.

Will narrowly avoided biting his own when the burning car rammed them once again. Will recoiled from the latest hit and sat up in his seat, uncomfortable as it made him to be seen, "We gotta figure out what this thing is." When Will was a child he would race as fast as he could from his upstairs bedroom to the bathroom below—in fear of being caught by that monster he had seen in that one terrible dream. Now it felt like the monster was fresh from the car lot with a new SUV. He'd laugh at his own thought if the visage of his mangled guts wasn't flashing before his eyes with each blink behind his broken glasses.

know what that means? Carlo?" No response. "There's a mind behind it! It's not like an animal. Maybe it's piloted remotely or the fire is just an eff..." If it was no better than a drone there'd be someone looking at screens, Will thought—just like he knew he should be doing.

The topography reader was a small, glass screen next to the radio and scanner—closer to Will as he was the copilot. The screen showed a large scar on the land, indicating the drop they had driven off. Zooming out, Will saw the scar bleed and mesh to the west where the land evened out—the burning car's route if there was an intelligent mind.

Not wanting to look, Will peeked over Carlo's pounding chest, and there at the end of the cliff he saw a glow—intelligent as it was unrelenting, "Carlo, hey!" The burning car rounded the corner. "Snap out of it, asshole! You're really gonna get us killed!" He snapped his fingers in front of the man with the means to save his life—the man only took in more air than his lungs knew what to do with. "Drive, dammit!" The fire of the burning car was worn back like a fiery mane off a prancing horse. It was coming to end them and so, gambling he wouldn't knock his friend out, Will punched Carlo in his cheek before slamming his fist against the horn.

Snapped out of trance, Carlo floored it. Narrowly missing the burning car's head on collision, letting the grind of the front tire thicken on their ears, Carlo drove west. West where that horrible city would welcome them with the loving and forgiving embrace of a drug addicted mother to her runaway. The chase was on just as it was before they took off from the drop, "Fire. It's just—it's fire," Carlo was speaking before his thoughts could articulate.

"I think the tire is flat."

"It's the frame, moron," Carlo managed to spit out.

"That's worse?" Will asked and Carlo shot him a look. Then another ram from the burning car to remind them of the greater danger.

The latest heavy strike seemed to knock some sense into Carlo as he snapped his fingers twice for the words to form coherently, "The gun! The gun in the glove compartment!"

"Gun? Gun in the glove compartment?" Will opened the compartment and sure enough he was able to take from it a pistol. He only realized his hand was jittering as he felt the weight of the weapon. "How long have we had this?"

"Always! Shoot the wheels out of the car!"

"Right," Will took off his seatbelt but right as he went to position himself out the window he hesitated, understanding the danger. He was not only about to put himself out in the direction of the burning car but also expose himself outside the safety of The Unwreckable.

"It's fire," Carlo said, sipping up the blood in his mouth, "that's all it is. Fire."

Will wiped the blood leaking from his nose, leaving a dark stain on his shirt sleeve, "We gotta figure out what it is, man." He felt the fire of the burning car in his nose when he tried to sniff. "We know what it is, then we know how to shake it."

A bitter laugh nearly leapt off of Carlo's mangled tongue. Shake it off? He had been trying for the last minute as he ventured further into the waste—the last place he wanted to lose himself in. "Look at it if you want. I don't know any car able to drive in that kind of condition." Fire, he thought. All it is—great and terrible—is fire.

Will didn't want to look. The glow in the mirrors and backup camera were enough, as was the next ram from the back. "There's not a person in there. Maybe it's some kind of self-driving car on the fritz?"

And the fire? Instead Carlo said, "Self-driving cars are illegal. I've explained this."

BAM! Will fixed his glasses as the sauced covered bones spilled over onto his feet, "Nobody cares about what's legal out here. Not you, me, or..." At last Carlo looked directly at Will. Neither enjoyed the sight of the other. Carlo, so ghostly white, thinking something far-fetched—Will and his bloody face, looking like he planted it into a cherry pie—yet the worst sight of all was behind them.

Will broke the stare first, "Drop! There's a drop!"

The signal of danger wasn't immediate for the driver of The Unwreckable. 'Escape, faster' were the words on loop in Carlo's mind. He gave a funny look to his partner, "What?" Eyes forward he saw it. A beautiful scene for a picnic were it not hurling them to death's embrace. Flying over the edge Carlo lost his breath while Will spent his voice, shouting "You've killed us, you've killed us!"

But death did not come for even the vanilla rabbit their landing car scared away. A modest wall of earth to their backs, The Unwreckable had driven off what could be called merely a minor drop in the land. It came with a price, however. A tremendous pain to the shoulders of the young men, a sting in the tailbone for Will, and a foul grinding sound to the front driver's tire as it gently finished creeping forward.

Otherwise-alive.

"Not dead," as Will put it, "not dead," he said again, trying to catch his thoughts. "Carlo?" He saw him panting desperately for air. So hungry to breathe Will thought him pierced through the chest with some wound. But he was only in shock from his wretched life flashing before his eyes. "I-I-I-I'll keep my eyes on the topography reader." Had Will not been so stunned and occupied trying to figure out what the nature of the burning car was he may have had his eyes there in the first place. Better later than never, he supposed. And better alive than dead, he decided was his motivator.

"It's not following us over the edge," Will observed. "It's—it's not mindless, Carlo." He noted Carlo was still opting to breath rapidly like a sweating madman. Will wasted no time and rolled down his window and looked up, "I don't see the glow. It's definitely not taking the same route as us. You

"Will!"

"I'm doing it!" He hated it but he was committing to what had to be their best chance of shaking off their pursuer. How was it that car was still going despite still being ablaze? He didn't want to think about it.

Better to think this was just like that movie he had seen but couldn't remember—sticking himself out the window, bloodied face, aiming out the pistol. Then he saw the speeding inferno before him.

It was different seeing it out in the open. It was worse—far worse—seeing it with the cool air blowing his hair forward, the very heat of the fiery wreck on wheels tingling off his skin. No driver. A wheel creaking to the side by an empty seat. How was it doing that? The thought had returned and for too long. In a second the burning car had sped over the unforgiving terrain bringing its flames closer to Will. He panicked watching the car come closer to him in real time and pulled the trigger, damning wherever the bullet flew.

CLICK! No bullet at all. CLICK! Again, nothing. Will went to look at the side of the gun to figure out what was wrong. The safety, he realized, the safety was on! BROOSH!

"No!" Will cried in despair. The burning car had slammed the side of The Unwreckable. He watched the pistol slip from his hand and fall beneath the shadow of the pursuing, unmanned car.

"What? What happened?" Carlo watched Will return to his seat inside the jeep, his face paler than it was before. "Where's the gun, Will?" Will went to look at Carlo, speechless. A moment later the burning car answered for him as it drove up to the side of The Unwreckable, matching it neck and neck. Eerily,

roasting by the fires of the interior, was the unhandled steering wheel. They each watched it spin as the fires licked The Unwreckable, searing off the print of 'STEP ON IT,' with its latest smack.

"It's not possible," Will mumbled between the side strikes of the hell car. "I-I can't figure it out! It just shouldn't—" another violent slap of burning metal onto them, "it shouldn't be possible!"

"It's cool," Carlo said, "don't worry about it, man. We're making a good pace, we're halfway back already." That was a lie. Carlo knew they weren't anywhere close to the city and they were still out in dead man's land. He held his bleeding tongue. If they could just find—a road! "Look! There's a road ahead. We just gotta keep west on it." The victory of finding the cracked and tar scarred road did little to alleviate their stress as the burning car kept on them by their side.

"If I could just get them off of us," Carlo shouted his frustration aloud, hitting the burning car back with his own sudden twist of the wheel. The mobile car-fire wasted no time in striking back, diminishing even the victory of retaliation. Will mumbled about something pertaining to certain doom. Despite the bright fire beginning to sting Carlo's eyes, the situation was looking darker by the minute.

It was hard to glimpse with flaming death trying to shove him off the road but Carlo spotted a sign.

"Stony Creek. What's there? Can we find help in Stony Creek?"

Will looked nearly asleep with how huddled he was in his seat, "Stony Creek? That's a ghost town. Nobody's there." Carlo cursed and dropped his shaking fist against the wheel.

They cut through Stony Creek. No help came from the empty trailers or the ominously scorched downtown hall. Three miles out they drove through the abandoned power plant on the dried river. No help came from the sandy maze of turns. No matter where the road took them the burning car did not relent.

On it smashed, even as The Unwreckable maxed out at 120 mph. Finally, the road took them to rainbow ridge, a great horseshoe formation on the land, long vandalized by bright colors and trendy terms.

"That's the rainbow," Carlo said and moments later they took the road underneath the formation.

"We're almost to the valley. We can get help there—" As if waiting for the first grain of hope for the night:

POP! The front tire popped from the broken frame. "No-no-no-no. Come on!"

"It's been burning the rubber the last five minutes," Will muttered.

Burning rubber? "I've got an idea," Carlo said, veering The Unwreckable for the next adjacent road. Will gave him a questionable look to which Carlo answered, "He's been at our side here for five minutes,

right? I know how we can lose him."

There were many rumors as to why it was called the graveyard. The most grim and widely believed story was that the government had buried a score of dissidents in the waste—before dumping a sea of worn car tires over the graves. Another common theory was that the tires had been there for years only for a storm to take off the topsoil hiding them. Nobody really knew how such a great sweep of tires appeared on the two sides of a lonely road overnight. But Carlo was thankful for the haphazardly narrow road that split what others had dubbed the red sea of burnt tires.

At first a few stray tires littered the ground and then came the valley of destroyed wheels. Too high and too slim a pass, finally a break in the terror. The burning car was forced to fall behind and before long a gap between it and The Unwreckable. Carlo smiled and Will picked his head up to the tone, 'oh, we might survive this?' To their great surprise the gap between the two cars grew—and then?

"Are we...I don't want to jinx it," Will sat up and leaned forward, "are we getting away?"

Carlo smiled. The sweetest smile he ever knew, "Look at it." It was far back in the rearview. "It's just a spec now." And then, to their relief, nothing. It was excellent timing as well as the high walls of tires lowered to the surface of the earth. Still, the tires covered much ahead but gone was the opportunity for the burning car to ride over them if it had dared.

Will grabbed at his hair as the adrenaline turned to a pure high, "Son of a bitch! We made it! Haha! God,

I can't believe it. What the hell was that thing thought? Seriously!"

"Gone," Carlo said. "It's-no..."

Their highs came crashing down to earth and below as—in the distance ahead of them—an orange glow glimmered. Carlo slammed the breaks, the grind in the front tire so severe it sounded ready to explode and join the lot surrounding them. It took a blink of the eye for the glow to transform into the burning car speeding at them from the opposite direction they had lost it.

How did it get ahead of us, both wanted to shout and cry. Yet both were speechless until Will screamed in a mindless terror. Carlo threw the car in reverse while his heart went wild. The front bumpers of The Unwreckable and the holocaust directly in front of them began to kiss. The dancing flames of the burning car's interior almost seemed to take the form of appendages, latching onto the front of their car—burning the text that once read 'PEACE EATER.'

Smoke seeped out from the hood of The Unwreckable as the fire seemed to spread from the SUV to the jeep. The high walls of the ruined tires were returning in the side mirrors. Carlo, sensing The Unwreckable ready to ignite, swerved over into the rubbery graveyard. The jeep Rhino, made to endure such an awful landscape, jumped up and down over the wasteland. The SUV, for once, appeared to struggle in the chase.

Once more a gap grew. But as the gap between the two cars intensified so too did the darkening smoke coming from the hood of The Unwreckable. The SUV broke from its direct path, trying to curve and cut off its prey. The dark smoke in front of Carlo gave him one last idea. Turning his wheel, keeping the burning SUV in front of them, he switched on his brights to blind their blazing adversary.

The world became brighter and brighter still. The Unwreckable with its altered high beams and the SUV whose fire was spreading to the sea of tires around them. Realizing they were stranded in an abyss of tinder before the hail of fire, Carlo shut his eyes having no more ideas on how to cheat certain death. The orange glow battled the white of the high beams. Orange was poised to triumph as the burning field reached its arms around The Unwreckable itself.

And the glow won.

The world was gone. A steep hill plucked the two men from the hell on earth that had tried to swallow them. A sensation of falling, violating their bodies within their armored jeep. Then a final crash to the earth.

All the light was gone. In its stead was darkness. Coldness and darkness and Will's whiny voice ordering Carlo to wake up. The last sense there made Carlo stir. He felt his arm return from the void. It touched his chest, also bringing it back to existence. Will's voice became clearer and Carlo's eyes opened. He saw two Wills over him. The two of them helped him onto his feet until his vision steadied and only one Will remained.

"What?" Carlo groaned as the ringing left his ears.

"I said I think my wrist is broke," Will said, then refusing his hand to let go of the other. He glanced over his shoulder, "Though that's not as bad as..." Left on its head, The Unwreckable was a smoking

pile of rubble. Its bad wheel was laid away separately, black smoke spewing from its opened stomach, its name no longer appropriate.

It was surreal to see what Carlo had named The Unwreckable reduced to a total wreckage. Done worse than he remembered doing to any other. He had to step forward to process it was gone—and that he was still alive. As for their adversary? He saw the lake of fire spread atop the hill. The glow had won. The pursuer's fire spread to the rubber field, sealing their own fate. They meanwhile were alive by the hill and gravity's grace. Happy with that thought, he turned to hug Will.

"Ah! Easy, easy! I said my wrist ain't right," Will cried. Carlo let go of him. He pushed Will by the shoulder in return. Will finally let go of his bad wrist to push Carlo back in the same manner. The two laughed. After that Will looked back up. "All those tires. It's toast, man."

"Yeah," Carlo agreed softly. Somewhere up in the sky, neither certain if it were so, each felt they had caught the tail of a shooting star.

Left on their own two feet, Carlo and Will left The Unwreckable to its grave. Feeling better to be alive than pained by their broken bones, the two tolerated their sores as they staggered back to civilization.

Though it was still dark out, the light of the distant city kept the world alight by its hue.

They spotted Joe's Gas Station over the last hill before the interstate. The remaining lights spelled 'Joe's a Statio' on the roof over the pumps. The novelty of the location was in the front lot. The ancient and unworking phonebooth like from that one show Will had tried to watch. Behind the gas station was an enclosed back lot where hooligans would congregate unbeknownst to the sleeping Joe inside. Tonight there was a crisp and faint smoke over a pulsing light in the back—a fire far unequal to the one Carlo and Will had become intimate with. "And that would be Nate," Will said as they neared the front of the gas station, eyes on the back smoke rising from the back. "We had a much better fire than he did. Don't suppose you wanted to say hi?"

"Hell no," Carlo was quick to say. "I need a drink and you need a doctor."

"No, I need the drink. You got a signal here? I don't want the cronies out back seeing us like this."

Carlo reached for his phone, "Nah, I get'ch yah." His heart skipped a beat then. "Son of a—I lost my wallet. It must have slipped out when we crashed back there." Will looked ready to protest and so Carlo

went on, "We're not going back, don't worry. I'm taking this all as a fresh start."

"Sounds good to me, man," Will went to enter Joe's store. "I'll cover cab fare too!"

"Hey, wait up! I was thinking. You know, we could treat this like a real fresh start. I mean, why not? Near

death and all that. Let's stop all this."

At that Will stopped in his tracks, "You mean we're not going to build another car?"

"I'm going to interrupt you right there, Claire. Tonight was an accident. There can be no denying that."

But the use of the word 'tragedy?' I would advise you not to exaggerate the facts of tonigh's events. This is a world where bad things happen. They just happen! What's important is moving forward. Equally important is understanding the truth, as well. And the truth is the government response was swift and

thorough. Thanks to our steadfast emergency services and our safety protocol, penned by yours truly, I'm happy to remind everyone the contamination did not escape the plant. As with all accidents, yes,

unfortunately a few fatalities. But I would highlight all the injuries our emergency services are successfully treating as we speak."

"Yes, you seem to be quoting your statement from earlier. I was actually hoping we could discuss how the plant's recent restructuring, which reports have called critical to the incident, were authorized by you personally."

"Ah ha ha! Claire! You've been misled on some front. We may never know who exactly was responsible.

But I can personally make the promise there will be a happy ending to this—does anyone really care about details after that?"

Will was ready to walk out once the councilman shined his teeth for the camera. He considered not paying for his drink but he thought about his new beginning. If Carlo was sincere about straightening out then he figured his co-pilot should follow suit. He left a wrinkled bill on the counter and flicked it over into Joe's lap. A pain came to his wrist but he endured it all the same.

While Will was inside, Carlo was scrolling through his phone, wondering what service to get a ride from.

His missing wallet was still on his mind. It wouldn't be wise to leave his ID sitting around right next to the remains of The Unwreckable. He wondered who he could bum a ride off in order to go get it. His cousins wouldn't ask too many questions—his cousins.

They ran the scrapyard. It wouldn't be that hard to put together a new vehicle with their help. And with his own know-how it wouldn't take much to make an Unwreckable 2.0. He chewed on the thought. Tell his father he loved him now or after asking his cousins for help?

Striding out of the store, cracking his drink with his good hand, Will decreed aloud, "I can't believe I didn't throw up after tonight. To new beginnings!"

"New beginnings, yeah," Carlo lowered his phone. "I was thinking about it and you know what? I'm pretty serious about trying school but it probably wouldn't take too long to make a new car. School might get a little stressful and we might need to let loose here and there."

Will stopped himself from taking his first sip of the drink. "Oh you're for real? I was worried you were serious about stopping these little escapades. Sounds good to me, I'm down. We just can't go so far out next time."

Carlo paused in a deep thought before going on, "Yeah. It's over. Way I see it? We're both alive after everything that went on back there. Let's make the most of it. Stop this road warrior crap while we're ahead." At that point a new thought became rather tantalizing. Something to make the most of the life he had been given back when earlier all had seemed lost. "I'm going to get serious. I think—I think I want to become an engineer."

"Yeah?" Will asked, his voice not fully convinced his partner was being serious. He stood in silence for another second. "Shoot, that's uh—that's great. Maybe you've got a point. Not hard to imagine you an engineer. I could go back to school too. Imagine me a botanist. That'd be cool."

Carlo gave a faint but genuine smile, "I could see that too."

"Yeah," Will nodded. "A fresh start. Let's do it, bro. After tonight I'm more than willing to turn my life around. You know what? Screw it. I'm even going to tell Alyssa how I feel."

That wrangled a sigh out of Carlo, "If it's something you need to get off your chest." He wondered if Will remembered her present engagement. His phone dinged. "Hey, got a signal."

"Great," Will went to enter the store but stopped at the door to look back. "Also, I was supposed to open tomorrow so I'm totally calling off. Remind me to message my work—hey—I'm not being selfish, right?"

Carlo waved Will off before returning to his phone, "No, just get your drink."

The bell over the door rang. Expired foods coated with the dust filled the shabby store Will had entered.

A cutout of a long-deceased football player watched vigilantly over a stack of warm beers—likely the freshest contests of the store. Opposite of the display was the counter where the old owner snored away in his chair, his baseball cap hiding his wrinkly face. Better he was asleep, Will thought. He didn't want to be seen stained in blood.

Will went to get his can of starberry energy from the back and returned to the counter. An old television hung from the ceiling. A report was discussing the disaster on the harbor Will had forgotten about.

Evidently Joe had found it boring himself and had fallen asleep to the story.

On the TV was a woman with dark hair and powdered skin sitting in a high-class chair, "I'm joined now by the representative of the city council and overseer of harbor's district." That caught Will's attention.

"Thank you for joining us on such short notice, Councilman Card."

The camera panned to a well-dressed man looking smug with his legs crossed. Indeed, he seemed more at home than the reporter. "It is a pleasure to be here tonight to correct the record, Claire."

"Mr. Card, we all heard your statement from the scene of tonight's tragedy. Your rhetoric was rather bold in regard to holding those responsible for the disaster accountable but you had neglected to mention who it was that signed off on the rushed developments of the plant."

"Believe me, I know. I just sent my cousins a message. I'll have to go in the day to salvage the scanner and topography reader otherwise I got some new ideas to try—oh..."

Again, Will stopped his tongue from tasting the starberry. "Oh what?"

"A post from Nate," Carlo said in a hushed tone. "He said he canceled his bonfire tonight. He was watching the scene at the harbor with the others." The skin on the two young men was pinched with an icy fear, "So what's over there then?"

They didn't want to look. They didn't want to believe.

Dreadful and shining. Hued in an orange glow. The light rounded the bend from the back of the gas station and casted its warmth upon the two. Speechless. Breathless. Stains adding to new stains, a sickness churning in their stomachs. Their nerves



QS

& Magazine ®

INDEFINITE JEST

Hi /lit/. It's me again. Ryan. How are you? Wait, don't answer that. I know you're teetering on the edge of mindbending LSD trip. Just like the rest of us. Wow. What a gnarly shitshow this has become. I hardly know what to say. Apparently we can't have nice things. Please pardon my leave.

If you look at all of the & releases on the *Issues* page of the website, you'll notice a fairly sizable gap somewhere between 2022 and 2023 when I decided to login to Minecraft and dig down—which of course (no regards) didn't quite turn out the way I had planned, believe it or not—and no doubt the temptations therein carved from my former temple that frail and destitute chaff of a man that came crawling back to the city just to be blown right the fuck on out all the way back through the mountaintops, over the Turtle's Shell to the wide cerulean expanse the surface thereof —shining, shimmering, splendid—I now hastily tread to save myself.

And as things digress from bad to whatever is worse than that, my path inevitably returns me to this, the internet's sickest most multiplexual independent literary bathhouse orgy. So, let's get saved!

Much recent ado has been made of Unreal Press, its alleged transgressions, the counterpoints therefore, and all of the fallout that has and is to most certainly come. I've reached out to a strong few in an attempt to marshal some sense from this autistic chaos, however nobody is willing to testify. I'm afraid the short answer is this: Discord is teeming with trannies.

As I said earlier, I might repeat myself.

Unreal Press is a true inspiration for me, that collaborative era when I released my novella to the scene and everyone seemed to be dropping mad loot crates, a real collaborative, exuberant time. I also recognize the greater literary scene online, its many egregores, and all of the potential moves in the game of Eschaton that no doubt continue to creep like mold on the finery of peripheral and ongoing sanctuaries such therein the true grit of any sordid Laotian Tennis Forum ought draw up for the entertainment—nay the betterment—of mankind, ourkind.

Behold—now I speak. We must come together as a united and mighty scene. We must no longer let the insolence of mere human differences make dry and salty the sacred bread that I bake. No longer! These ways serve us not! And they only prove to undo the fabric of our tapestry. We have greatness among us. Consider this so!

The leadership of &'s upcoming compilation has led to some controversy, which itself hitherto has borne untold truths and falsehoods, a myriad of political skirmishes, that which any further concern for none of us shall grant henceforth—so it has been commanded! And so the publishing of personal details too shall be discontinued and forgiven, as shall any transgression made in the name of Discord.

Harken my word: We must come together to amass against a common enemy, so let me prepare for us the altar wherefore thereupon the true and ultimate Sacrificial & shall be rendered for our most thorough purification; Behold, Let it be so:

The enlightened /lit/eracy of these humble kingdoms, let us turn our swords to the clear enemy, the true enemy:

F Gardner.

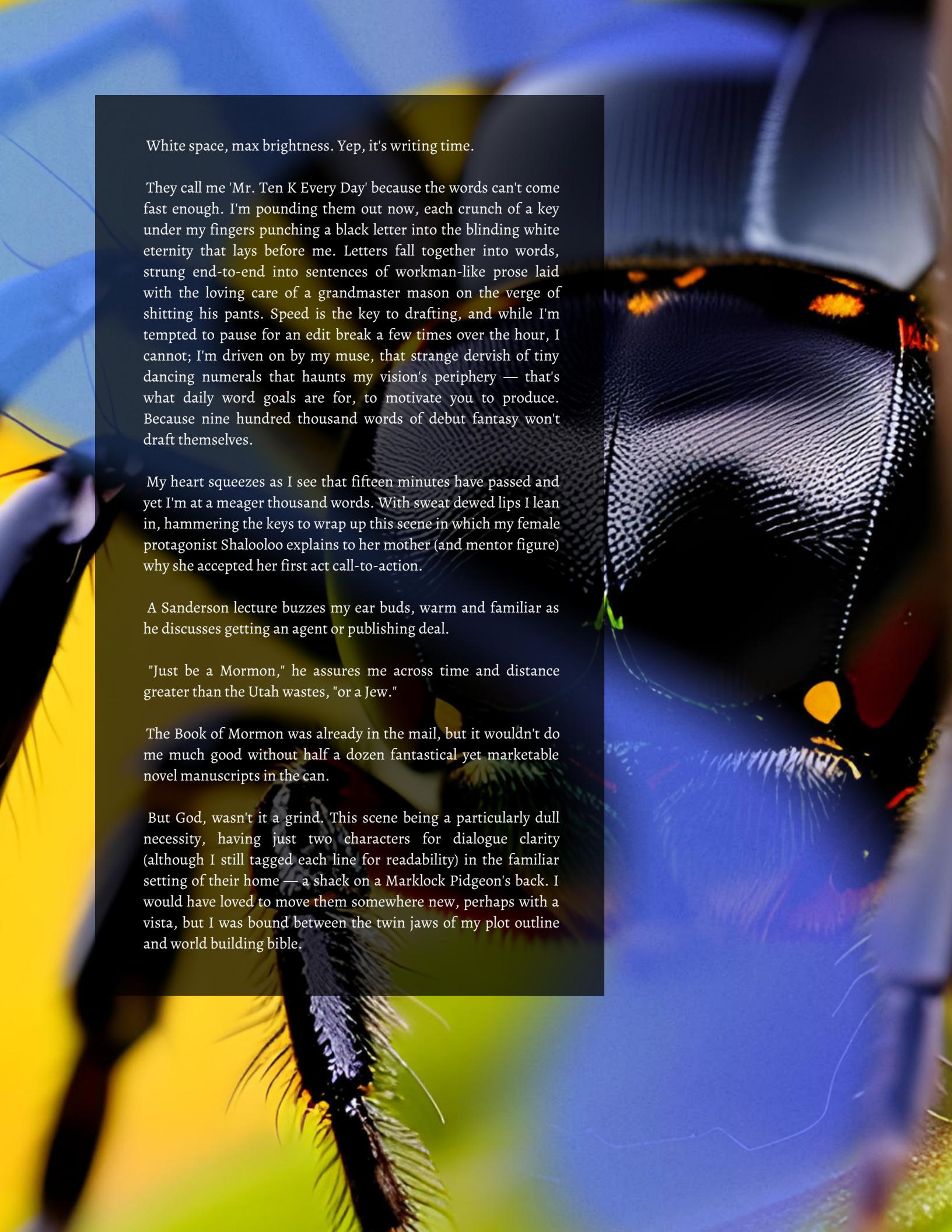
For he of all is only worthy of such scorn.

And is it not so? That the one individual truest fit for the full comeuppance of all these most abject crimes upon forethere circles of Warriors that do build their empires is he? 'Tis so and you know! That the deepest conviction of exactitude you could dream to conjure in these, the darkest times of our threshingfloor follies is *that*, the ire for the only veritable enemy of us, *ours*, the abominable and most reprehensible of adversaries: Frank Gardner himself! Let his name be pronounced in spheres of influence most expedient to his undoing and heinous to his name! Lo, a hex!

Yes! Now is understood the breadth of these truths, the lessons most necessary for the ongoing bookcraft of this era—on the internet—for the lulz, yet!—to infinity! And let yourself not be fooled: You are *here*. Let my words be so. And to those who do not follow this word true, shall they be singled out for sanction—for the discipline of one follows from the discipline of many.

So be it now: Do not falter. Thus is the moment: a great peace upon you. And I shall return with many riches the next time we are well met; many happy returns.





White space, max brightness. Yep, it's writing time.

They call me 'Mr. Ten K Every Day' because the words can't come fast enough. I'm pounding them out now, each crunch of a key under my fingers punching a black letter into the blinding white eternity that lays before me. Letters fall together into words, strung end-to-end into sentences of workman-like prose laid with the loving care of a grandmaster mason on the verge of shitting his pants. Speed is the key to drafting, and while I'm tempted to pause for an edit break a few times over the hour, I cannot; I'm driven on by my muse, that strange dervish of tiny dancing numerals that haunts my vision's periphery — that's what daily word goals are for, to motivate you to produce. Because nine hundred thousand words of debut fantasy won't draft themselves.

My heart squeezes as I see that fifteen minutes have passed and yet I'm at a meager thousand words. With sweat dewed lips I lean in, hammering the keys to wrap up this scene in which my female protagonist Shalooloo explains to her mother (and mentor figure) why she accepted her first act call-to-action.

A Sanderson lecture buzzes my ear buds, warm and familiar as he discusses getting an agent or publishing deal.

"Just be a Mormon," he assures me across time and distance greater than the Utah wastes, "or a Jew."

The Book of Mormon was already in the mail, but it wouldn't do me much good without half a dozen fantastical yet marketable novel manuscripts in the can.

But God, wasn't it a grind. This scene being a particularly dull necessity, having just two characters for dialogue clarity (although I still tagged each line for readability) in the familiar setting of their home — a shack on a Marklock Pidgeon's back. I would have loved to move them somewhere new, perhaps with a vista, but I was bound between the twin jaws of my plot outline and world building bible.



Thirty minutes now and still this damn scene! Shalooloo's mother is begging her to stay, saying that girls can't be Marklock riders, when I realize I've made a grave error.

Rapid clicking. The sound of blood flowing in my ears smothers the steady drone of craft secrets from Sanderson. I open my personal wiki and five additional outline documents — my screen segmented like a paleolithic centipede by countless diagrams, color-coded tables, and bulleted lists.

I can taste the stale air of my dimly lit apartment. How could I have overlooked the contradictions? Shalooloo's mother cannot be both an archetypal mentor AND a Lovable Challenger — it violated the ironclad laws of The Hero's Journey (problematic as aspects of the author may be), Save the Pussy™, and Sanderson's Fifth Law of Human-Like Relations.

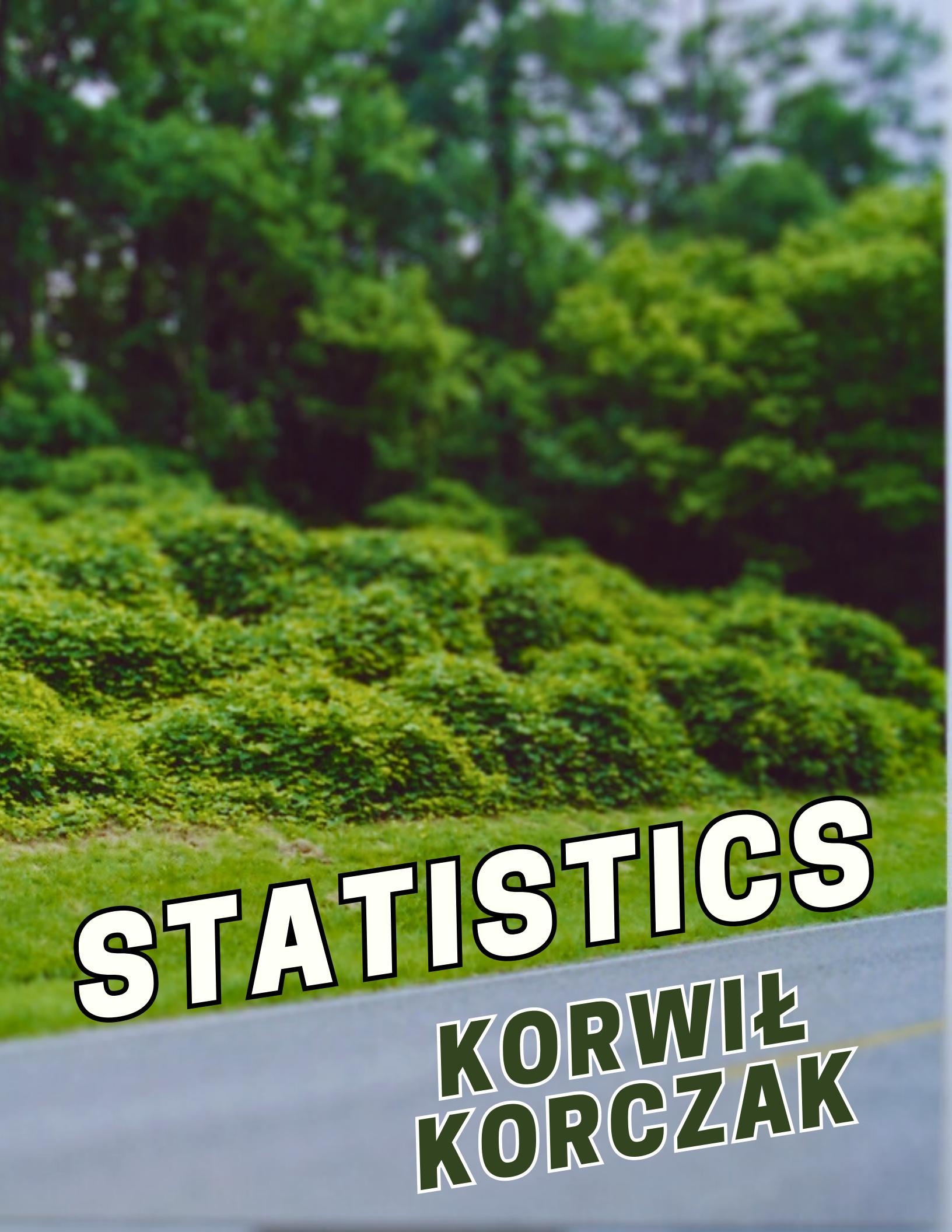
Twenty minutes left. There's no time. I swallow, bring up my primary manuscript, and it is decided. The mother will relinquish her mentor status in this scene and one of the other two mentor characters can be retrofitted to fill the gap during edit phases two and three respectively.

And then I am flying. Do not mistake me, my ass never parts from the curved caress of my gaming chair, but the muse strikes as I transition to an exciting scene where Shalooloo starts her first day at Marklock Rider Academy and meets the envious older bully boy who constantly threatens to murder her but who will pivot at the novel's 70% mark into the lovable rascal archetype and be a possible love interest for book three wherein he'll have a 'Big Damn Co-Hero Moment' (yet elegantly dodge a direct Bad Boy Crush trope).

The screaming of African Americans outside rouses me from my fervor. My cheeks burn, throat parched, as I note I've hit the one hour mark. With relief I see the word count is at nine thousand nine hundred and ten, which is close enough to the mark for this humble fantasist.

With what little time I have left before bed, I take my defenseless darlings to the sword like an ancient Pharaoh sighting a heap of Hebrew infants. Adverbs are slashed and burned in favor of powerful verbs like "ambled". Adjectives removed except in instances where they are crucial to bring characters into stark relief by describing eye color. I struggle to define passive voice but know it when I see it, and any possible sprout I spot is torn out to the root like a gardener among dandelions.

My labors complete, my collapse into my bed to dream of the many dream sequences to come.



STATISTICS

**KORWIŁ
KORCZAK**

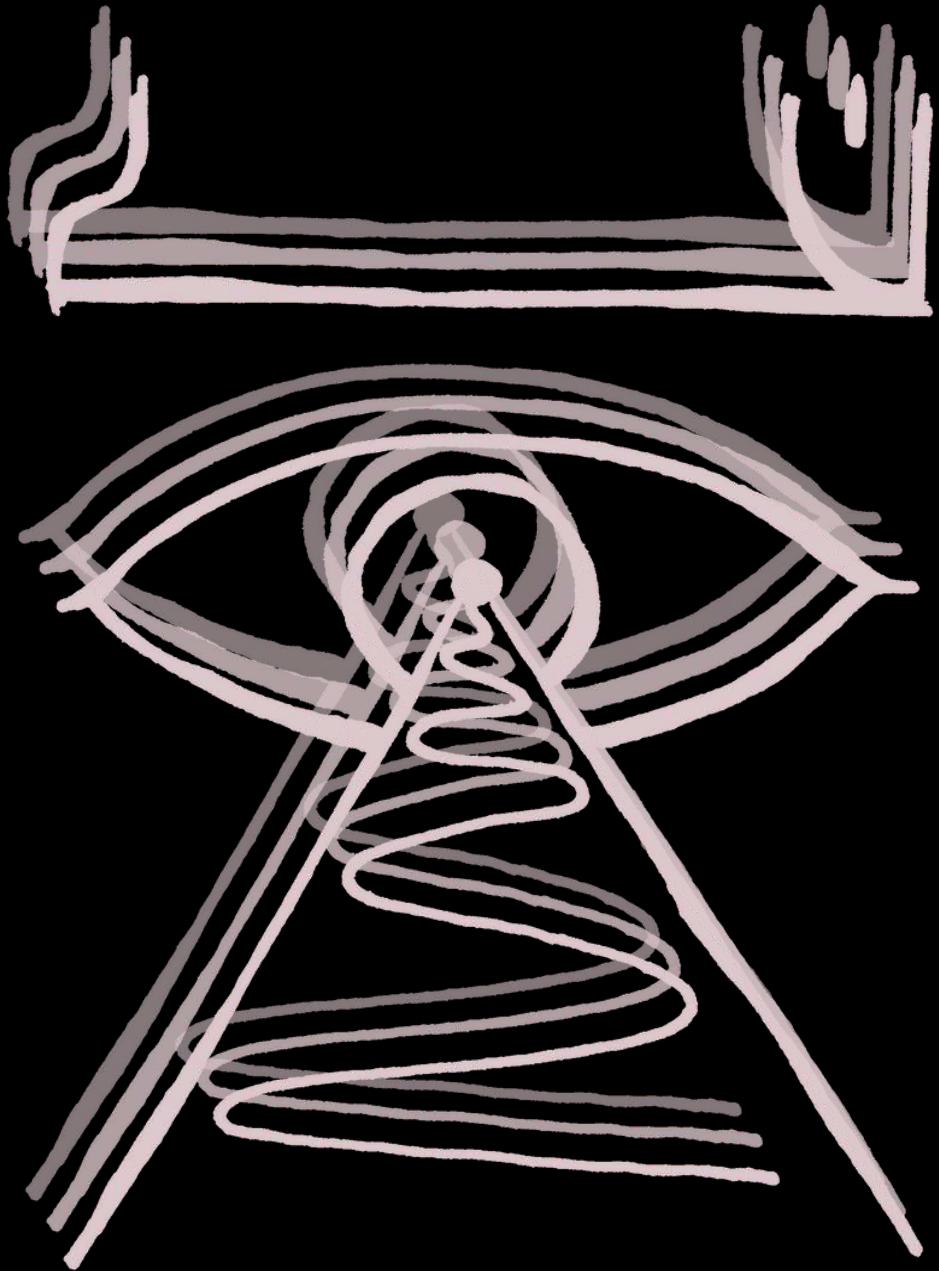
The bells! they ring!
From tentative lost arbors gone
Long wild with kudzu everhang'd,
To the junkyard-dead, rusting steel
Cemeteries in which our silhouettes
Did fade; or were, perhaps, reconstituted.

We died not on manicured tall hills,
Nor within slight cerussite dreams,
But in fallow halls wreathed of public opinion,
And: political screed.

We died face-down in dirty ditches,
Where grey water stilly laid;
We died limbless in deserted orchards,
Where our wet meat glistened the clay;
We died fatty-livered, we died from
Cirrhosis, we died with our
Flame-tarnished needles still stuck
In the vein. We died in our trucks,
Wrapped 'round telecom poles, and
We slipped—one haggard-booted
Foot at a time—to the grave.

We died; we died.

It was a field day
For statisticians.



The Schizo Cantos

by Hierophant

By which some lurching probe is launched on the waking world, dreams, and the place between them, but mainly the metaphysical experience of the Psycho-pathic things: the errant jars made by some wasteful potter overfilling orders, which once glazed and fired are never filled but left to break or be displayed or simply catch dust. Much to follow will be idiosyncratic, idiopathic, and likely idiotic, but I'll try my best to skirt that Great Satan the idio-logic. Don't worry about the titles, don't worry about the meaning—I'd advise you don't worry at all, but know it does mean something, and that I'd never waste a single scrap of your infinite time with words assembled absent intent. Nothing will be presented in order, aside from the painful necessity that it has to be. If I could transpose this body of work whole into your brain, free of causation and direction, I would. I've got a message somewhere in here, and there's no telling if I'll ever be able to write enough or if you'll ever be willing to read enough to stitch it together, but I suspect both are possible or even unavoidable. You'll find a constant cast of characters, a shuffled deck of scenes, a pointless haze of verbal tricks, and a running thread of themes, if you can only delude yourself as much as I've managed. Quality is subjective but mine is inconsistent, objectively. I'm not interested in my best interest or yours, so it's likely better—but I'd prefer otherwise—if you never read beyond this.

INTRO





A tower coursing he—without domain
His every crashing step a thunder-spree
Of star-king glory he—the world astride.

And grief alive aside—a counter strain
To hang upon the lever of his pride
So what is left beside? The edifice.

What grief though, could haunt the monument hall
And yawning quarry corridors beyond
All along that cavern-hearted empty
That perfect vast and time-benighted thing?
Through grey and godly-columned atria
Might yet a single one be wandering?

“What then,” the long cry “should become of me?”
But only echo-shades do chorus back
At he, a quick-discarded thing betrayed
Not by the blinded hand that crafted him
But momentary purpose that he met
For that fragmented boundless alien whim.

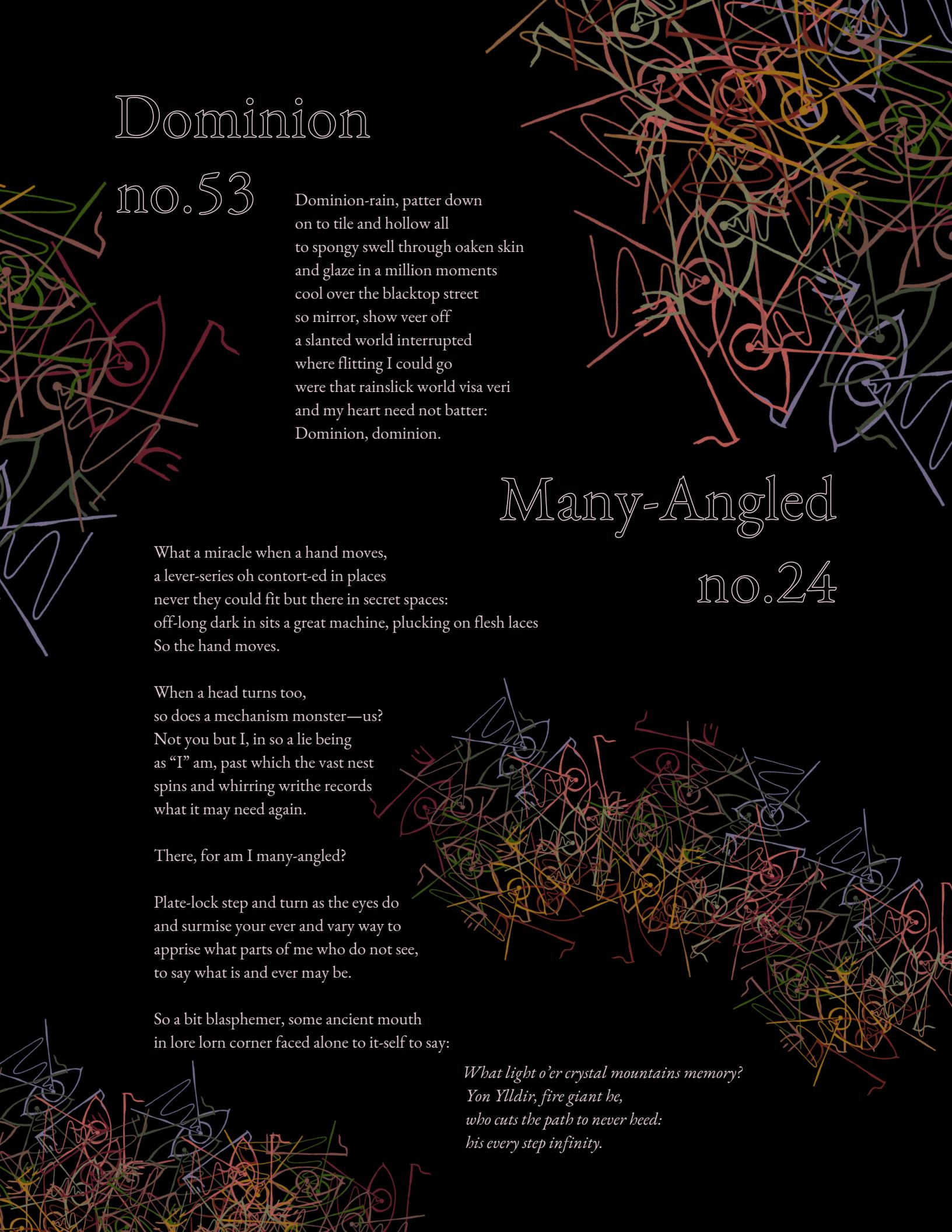
no.12

Without me is a static world by night attained
Howling in the voice of unfamiliar streets
The built-up tire screech by distance gone
To wash and flow on top which float
The eyes of unfamiliar lights that through
An unfamiliar frame apprise
My transitory form and place and self.
From some fear somnambula there—
Into the labyrinthine, fairly cystine
Wholly pristine wallow-pit that hangs
Or teeters over down still deeper
Out which lets some pithy plea or slith’ring treat—
I have fled to leisure wander till
My time allot minted on the day is drained
But now I’ve time to squander still
In grated halls where far light falls
Through dome’d glass once blown
For windows there to hold away from me
The things that know no other place
Bare held by rubber rotten seals;
Each oily crumbling parch-creek beds
Held only by the grace of their decay forgotten.

no.13

Dominion

no.53



Dominion-rain, patter down
on to tile and hollow all
to spongy swell through oaken skin
and glaze in a million moments
cool over the blacktop street
so mirror, show veer off
a slanted world interrupted
where flitting I could go
were that rainslick world visa veri
and my heart need not batter:
Dominion, dominion.

Many-Angled

no.24

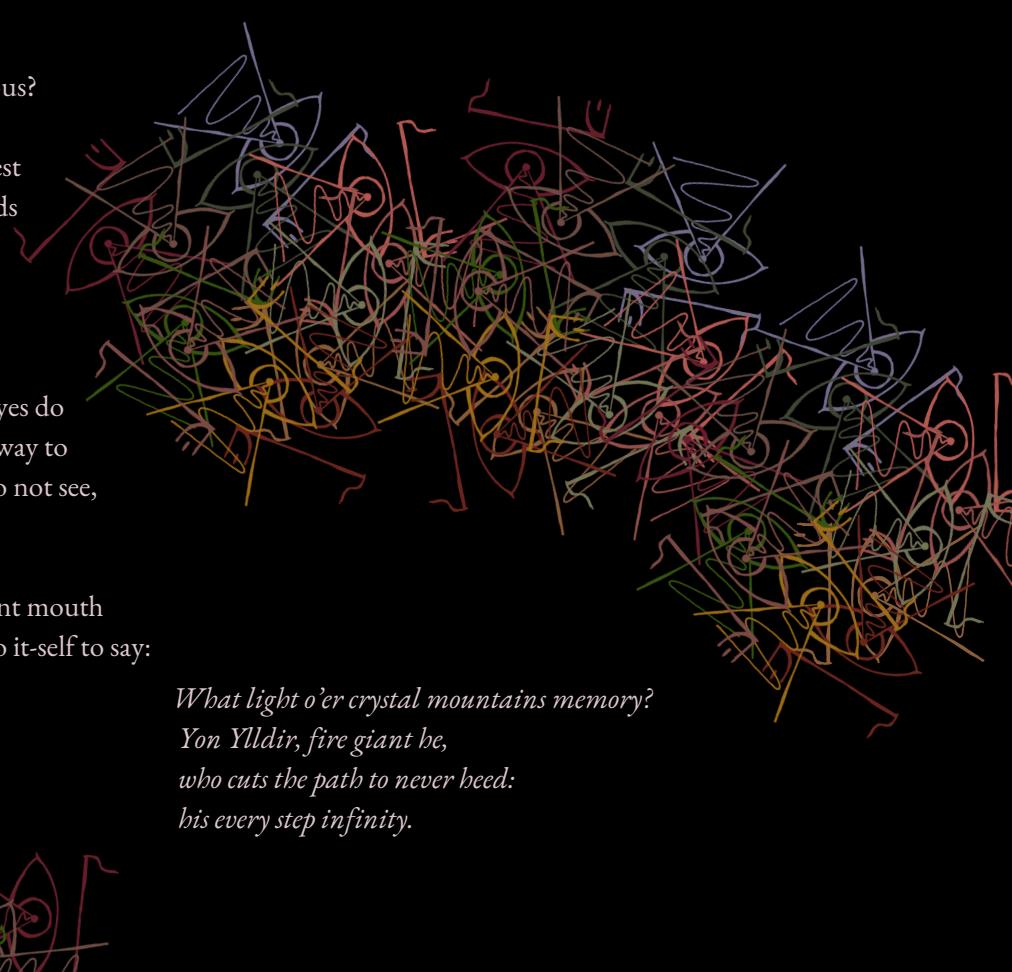
What a miracle when a hand moves,
a lever-series oh contort-ed in places
never they could fit but there in secret spaces:
off-long dark in sits a great machine, plucking on flesh laces
So the hand moves.

When a head turns too,
so does a mechanism monster—us?
Not you but I, in so a lie being
as “I” am, past which the vast nest
spins and whirring writh records
what it may need again.

There, for am I many-angled?

Plate-lock step and turn as the eyes do
and surmise your ever and vary way to
apprise what parts of me who do not see,
to say what is and ever may be.

So a bit blasphemer, some ancient mouth
in lore lorn corner faced alone to it-self to say:



*What light o'er crystal mountains memory?
Yon Ylldir, fire giant he,
who cuts the path to never heed:
his every step infinity.*





From The Complete Works of God II

Compiler's Note

It isn't often that what scholars – on this occasion, the conservative reader would be advised to read: archheresiologists – call revealed literature manifests itself in the form of a collaborative 'novel' scribed by *il/lit/erates*, in a Google doc, under the purported editorship of an 'Édouard Musbodijk', and yet that's precisely what The Complete Works of God II is – tho' its fate has hitherto been more that of a sepultured Nag Hammadi codex. Its date of composition is ca. December 6–14, 2018, thus flanked by such works of similar stature and sentiment as Hypersphere (2015; a copy of which is in the MOMA Library) on one end, Coronameron (2020) and the annotated Moby-Dick (2021) on the other. ¶Why, then, has this work lingered in obscurity? why was it not seen thru to publication? This fish was given; one knew not what to do. The full, rough Google doc was since deleted. Hence whence. Were the Complete Works then never completed? Such works are always relative; it's a matter of decision: here, too, some editorial authority sets up bounds to have prepared and enshrined. But here we stand at our dig, and what remains is fragmented, tho' still full to satiny: what remains is (α) the 'organised version', a suggest-only doc created ca. Dec. 8 and last suggestions accepted Dec. 15, 2018; (β) a PDF of Dec. 9 lacking the penultimate three sections of α; (γ) a PDF of α, 'lacking' only the penultimate section of α (greyed out in the doc: preserved yet deleted) (it is this version that has been archived on the & site). From the contemporary threads, one can judge that the work was 'more or less' finished (cover designs were already being produced), had the project not come to naught and the original document deleted; if I remember aright, the original contained significant material that has been lost – what, maybe 50 pages, or more? Yet for all that, what remains is, perhaps not 'compleat', but well and truly collected. ¶Starting in December 2019, I had the idea of compiling and setting these materials, these works, into a Book, print-on-demand (initially, before the end of that year), but this too lingered: by July 2021 I had a document in a near finished state: the book would measure 4.25" x 6.875" (smallest size available on Lulu – to make a small but significant book-object), numbers (xiij +) 420 pages, with (reduced) canonical margins, and is set in Caslon (with headings in Cochin). And still: nothing. The decision to edit, to compile, holds within it the equally forceful possibility to betray one's source, I mean by not transmitting it, by abandoning it and holding it in privacy – the action of inaction. An editor is an author who does not, by definition, write, and the desire to hold authority while forgoing any foreword must be just as great as that of grafting one's grotty annotations all over the text. Perhaps we should become like compilers of exsiccata, replacing language with material samples of lichens, fungi, algae: that's a book, that's an author function. ¶And perhaps one's negligence is apropos this: an exsiccata of excrements. The Complete Works of God II (full subtitle: The Definitive Guide for Dismantling Capitalism, Killing Obama, and Saving the West) shows its age: filled with sophomoric scatology and (sometimes Landian) pseudophilosophy, several scenes from The Master's screenplay pasted straight in, an essay on traps (reposted and published in Coronameron, pp. 232ff), and so so much dated Peterson shit, one knows what to expect. There's something that drives people to express themselves in the stock of clichés, the 4chan/internet repertoire; and yet, far off, it is an irreverent spirit one sees seemingly less,

be it in posts or texts of (dubious) 'literary' expression. ¶So too – the least one could do, in the spirit of great literary journals, was to excerpt a selection of these complete-incomplete works – the influence on compilation here. A 'well-rounded' impression of the whole will give you 'Hegelian-dialectics' shiffling rants, 'owo cumtro' (cute title, howev'), or 'The Foretold Coming of Kek, Son of God II' (the deleted penultimate section mentioned supra, cringy doggerel of a vulgar antisemitic bent, which is far outclassed by the satirical captions of another section not far from it – 'Chinese Oriental "Boxer" rebel, of the type commonly seen during the so-called "Ince Rebellion" of late-dynastic China, 1899–1901', below the supreme gentleman; Jewish Android Oligarch pictured walking alongside fe(male) Oriental Communist spy sent by the Ching Chong Regime', below the Zucc walking with a (broad-shouldered, awkwardly hunched) young Asian woman), 2c.; or, alternatively, an anthology of the choicest sentences. Do we really need the former? can we be bothered with the latter? No, no (respectively). That is the whole; here we value selection. Even at 'The Gospel of Gregory Berrycone' (an early section of the Works, reproduced here in its entirety, save for epigraphs and some footnotes) some might scoff, for its zaniness, tho' it shows the fully formed effort of a 'Levirushan' (in Coronameron), attempting to make of Berrycone and God II key characters (like the dodo or Pepys in the latter work) in an otherwise wholly disparate text. On the whole, however, we have selected but a few extracts to be of readerly interest. Section-internal compilatory omissions have been marked by a '□'.

★

The Gospel of Gregory Berrycone

1 Origin of Gregory Berrycone and the Absurd

¹ In the Beginning it was a dream
and the Dreamer was dreaming
a dreamed dream.

² Dreamed was the dream
until the Dreamer woke up
and disappeared:

³ the Dreamer only is
for as much as he dreams.

⁴ The Awake tas dhen was made flesh
and dwelt above the dreamers.

⁵ He tried all to wake them up
but they wouldn't.

⁶ Two loud fellers were sent
to wake up the dreamers

⁷ but they ended up falling asleep
because they were asd sleepy
and slept, asleep, a sleepy sleep
and dreamed dreamy dream-like dreams.

⁸ Times have gone and times will come

and

and times are gone and are incoming
⁹ and they don't stop coming
and they don't stop coming
and they don't stop coming.

¹⁰ A man did come at a point in time,
a fan rid home at a joint in as rhyme

¹¹ and brought light to all dreamers,
and caught fight to call beavers.*

¹² The man's name was Gregory,
the can's blame was bankruptcy

¹³ and the absurd reigned for a thousand years,
and the angered trained for a rotund sphere.[†]

¹⁴ God II said: 'That's really cool',
fraud Blue pled: 'That's barely fool',‡

¹⁵ and danced and sang all night long
and glanced and rang the all-bright dong.

¹⁶ What Gregory Berrycone brought to the world was very good
and everyone liked it, except Blongonius the Firth (rth), king of
the kingdom in which he was the king and kinged a lot in.

¹⁷ Blongonius was actually Berrycone's son, as he would realize later, but didn't.¹⁸ Blongonius was defeated after three days of bloody
bloomy bluwy battle, and Berrycone reigned over the world for
three thousand years.¹⁹ At the end of this three thousand years,
Berrycone aged one (i) year, and his Dog (the Dog that Berrycone
had, the Dog, who was a dog, and a very good one) had aged one
(i) dog-year.²⁰ This represents the duality of man-Dog, the divine
dialectic that defines the bovine alphabetic of Cow II, king of
Cowgdom.²¹ The kingdom of Cow II, the Cowgdom kingdom
was not really real, but was irreally irreal and everyone thought it
was a bad idea.²² Even Gregory Berrycone.²³ And because of that,
a bongus was born: Bongae of Bognole, the Bognolic Bongo player.

2 The birth of Bongae of Bognole, the Bognolic Bongo player

¹ Bongae was born and died.

² The time comprehended
between his birth and his death
is said to be his life
³ but many doubt this
and is probably not true
even if it is.

⁴ Bongae was born when he was seven years old, and in the time
he existed before his birth, he existed[§] as a dream.⁵ He was in a
dream dreamed by a dreamer, whose dreams are dreamy and
dream-like, like dreams, as he dreamed and dreamed while sleeping
asleep a sleepy sleep.⁶ The dreamer was a young man without
hopes for his life.⁷ This young man didn't have a name until he
found one lying on the ground, and that name was called John.

⁸ John (not the name, the young man) wrote a lot and hoped to be
a writer.⁹ He already was a writer, since he wrote. And wrote a lot,

therefore

therefore was a lot of a writer.¹⁰ But John didn't believe things actually work like this. For him, to be a writer is to be recognized as one, something he wasn't.¹¹ John's idea of a writer depended on other people's perception to him, and that perception had to be one that classified him as a writer.¹² But this never happened.¹³ This is why John didn't have any hopes for his life.

¹⁴ John became a dreamer, since he couldn't be a writer.¹⁵ A dreamer is someone who dreams dreamy and dream-like dreams while asleep and sleeping a sleepy sleep.¹⁶ That is what John set himself to do, even if he didn't like it.¹⁷ 'I have to do this, even if I don't like,' is what John used to think.¹⁸ He dreamed, like dreamers who dream dreamy dream-like dreams, dreamy dream-like dreams, and that was very good for him.¹⁹ In his first dream, he dreamed a dream-like dream about a priest who hangs himself after finding out he is god.²⁰ In his second dream, he dreamed a dreamy dream about a writer to sets himself to be a dreamer, even though he was already a writer, and his name was Joe.²¹ The third dream was about a dog who ran so fast around the earth he bit his own tail.²² The fourth dream was about a cat who likes to dance until he finds out dancing is not absurd enough – and Be Praised Gregory Berrycone the Son, son of Gregory Berrycone the Father, creator[¶] and destroyer of all absurd and non-absurd things – and stops dancing.²³ The fifth dream is about his John's mom, a Mom like all Moms, a Mom that loves his Son, John, even though not all Mom's Sons are Johns.²⁴ The sixth dream was about a book with infinite pages, each page had infinite letters, each letter had infinite meaning.²⁵ This was the book of his dreams, that he dreamed, in which his dreams, and everyone's, and everything – not only dreams – is registered.²⁶ The seventh dream was about Bongae.^Δ

3 John's Dream of Bongae

¹ Once upon a time – and a very (very[◊]) good time, there was a Dream.² This was the Dream John dreamed, asleep – sleeping a sleepy sleep – (a very dreamy and dream-like dream) in which Bongae appeared.³ Bongae played the bongos.⁴ The bongos sounded Cool and Good –; and, as God said: 'That is very Cool and Good and Nice': when referring to the Bongos he play'd.⁵ It was a song (very much a song, very soundful; – full of Songness: an Ideal Song [for Bongos]), very Nice & Cool & Good, and John liked it Very... Much...⁶ the versicle of numbr. [6] They were in a bot in a desert of water made out of watery sand. Watery sand? Sandy Waters. It sounds like a old Blues musician.⁷ And there was a Pirate with them, and His (not God's – even though the Pyrate [*could be and maybe*] was actually a God – because Everything is God) name was Scrogglebockington of Brytain.⁸ Scrogglebockington had a Splayd on his Backpack, and also Sporks and Knorks and Spifes – but No (not any of: there were none of the following things) Forks or Knives or Spooneth.

⁹ He played with the Splayds & Spifes & Knorks & Sporks and God said that it was all Nice & Cool & Good.¹⁰ They all played with the

the Splayds & others; even Bongae, whilst'e playing the Bongos: it was an incredible talent of his – one of many.¹¹ The Pyrate started his Discourse, then.

4 The Pyrate's discourse

¹ All is good and all is bad.

That is the nature of Berrycone's creation,
and he is the dreamer who woke up
and is trying to wake us all up.

² The Kingdom of Berrycone is upon us,
and among and above us,
and inside us and outside,
it is All and it is Nothing.

³ It is Absurd: that is true.

It is Understandable: that is false.

It is Peaceful: that is true.

It is true: that is false.

⁴ Its nature, artificial in its nature,
natural in its artificialness,
absurd in its absurdity;
it is the World of Berrycone.

⁵ It is all vain and ilusion

or it was: in the Old World.

Berrycone has brought not truth to this world
but the absurdity that is true, and isn't.

And that's false.

⁶ 'There's no new thing upon the earth,'
said Solomon, a wise – not so much –
man of the Old World.

⁷ All is new, but only in its Absurdity
that All is Absurd is nothing new
but News came and All is New
and All is Absurd and Still.

⁸ Nothing could ever be a thing
in the Old world.

Everything could – and ought – to be nothing
in this World
while being the thing it is.

⁹ Of Boats I sing, and desert's waters
Sandducks all over the bay.

¹⁰ In a dream I find myself,
John's dream, that is:
dreamy dream, dream-like dream
of a dreamer who dreams.

¹¹ A dream is absurd. But that is absurd.
The absurdity of dreams, being well-known,
isn't absurd anymore.

¹² The absurdity of a dream
is what's expected of the dream
therefore it isn't absurd.

¹³ The world is still the Old World,
and is not Absurd yet.

¹⁴ By being Absurd, therefore,
it Is absurd, while not yet being so.

¹⁵ A backflip and a scream
of an eagle's scream, a dream and a bongo
of a player's bongo.

¹⁶ Absurdity is in All of us and none of them.
But who is to say We are we and They are they,
and We aren't They and they aren't we?

¹⁷ Berrycone said, 'I don't know',
and these are the words to live by.

¹⁸ But he knows. But he can't lie.

That is the Absurdity we ought to strive for.

¹⁹ Lie, and you will fail.

²⁰ Say the truth, and you are lying.

²¹ Know the Absurd and integrate it,
and you will know freedom.

²² But freedom is nothing and it is worthless.

The freedom you should strive for isn't the freedom of the free:
It is the freedom of the freed, but not yet free.

²³ Doctrines of the Absurd will appear: false doctrines.

But he who knows the true doctrine will know it,
and he who doesn't won't.

²⁴ But will he? That is to say he can know something
and that contradicts the nature of Absurdity.

²⁵ Nothing is knowable, yet nothing is unknown.
All is absurd in its unkownness.

And all is known.

²⁶ The conclusion is:
the conclusion isn't.

²⁷ And John woke up (and Woke Up) just after that.

* One thing that's very particular of this book is that every Berryconean versicle of this passage actually has meaning, and this meaning is found in subsequent books of the Bitble (the Gospel according to Bungonelbe of Thyclena and the *Complete Works* of Shakespeare mostly). The scholars are very divided on this: some claim (not without proof: the spatial discrepancy and others) that the writer couldn't have had contact with the other books, even though they were written before and were very famous in their time, but the coincidences are so much and so precise that it's hard to believe in the absence of meaning to life through osmosis and every kind of existence despair is not only a very mechanic truth to the presence of absence of meaning that not only through mechanisms of coping of machines, heat machines, that books and geeks and frauds and pseuds are the most mechanists complainers of machine referencing in academic scholarly mazes of doom. This said, the meaning of this versicle is that, when Berrycone found dead beavers near his house, realizing their life hadn't really been taken out of them (they were dancing), he called his knights to beat the shit out of them (fight) and finally have their life actually come back to them, because the life essence feels when the body is hurt and it hurts more with the distance of the life essence to the body, thus the easiest way to stop the pain is to come back to the

the body. Now, the meaning of the story is for you!!!! yes YOU!!!! the READER!!! to DISCOVER AND explain to ME. Yes, to Me, the Writer of Footnotes, King of Foot and Foot of Notes and a Noteful King of Meaningful Strings of Text Quartet. Do that and you will know freedom.

† The meaning of this versicle is that the absurd, new to the world, first manifested itself by being a rotund sphere, many people were angry because they didn't like the rotund sphere (they were ok with the absurdity it represented, but didn't like spheres at all) and, realizing that the rotund sphere was too strong for thy to fight against it, they trained. They trained for a thousand years, but when their training had finished, the rotund sphere was gone. The absurdity had came out of the rotund sphere and was all over the world. The story is itself absurd, and that's the good thing about the Bibble: it's very crunkly.

‡ I actually know the meaning of this versicle but I'm not actually going to tell you because this footnotes are becoming too big and I don't like big things, they scare me, and when they scare me and I'm scared of them because they scare me, a scared scrabbler of the Scrungle scroll, I run and run and trip over the rocks over the cocks over the mocking socks inside my pants and it hurts a lot. So I keep running and fuck, it really hurts, but I'm really scared of the Big thing, afraid it's going to get closer to me, bigger, and scare more and become bigger as it scares me more (because a lot of the things that we perceive as bigger really get bigger, and when I'm scared of the big things I think that they are bigger than how big they actually are, and I get really scared and really small compared to it, because as something gets bigger and you're comparing yourself to that big thing, in comparison, you get smaller) and I run and die.

§ The word 'existed' here doesn't have the meaning you are probably used to. Here it means a lot of things, but I'm not going to say a lot of them. It's too much to be in a footnote. A better way of saying everything that 'existed' means in this versicle is by writing a book about it, but I'm too lazy to do that, even though I'm not lazy enough to not write the footnotes.

The most important meaning you have to be aware of is that of poetry. Poetry is something with really nice words that sound beautiful, and that's a good thing. Existing is also a good thing, but not for everyone. Poetry isn't also always nice for everyone, sometimes it isn't, and the fact that it's not always a good thing is also not always a good thing. But I'm going to far now. The relation I'm trying to make is that both are sometimes good things, and that's one of the meanings of the word 'existed' in this versicle. □

|| This is an interesting idea. Not an idea that scholars have discussed a lot about or anything like that, I just like it. It gives me the tickles, the nickels and the pickles, and within it I found truth to life, and with fishskin I frowned upon the tooth of knives.

¶ 'Creater' is actually the intended word. It is a neologism of 'creator' and 'eater', things Gregory Berrycone the Father was. It sounds a lot like 'critter', and that's intentional. A critter creates and eats, and Gregory Berrycone is the primordial critter, since critters can only exist in the Absurd. Thanks to you and to me we are banks to clue and to flee.

△ In the Plongus scroll, there is an additional dream. It's the 'dream in which Montaigne rides a motorcycle through the desert without any worries, but finds out that he has no legs and ends up dying because motorcycles can't be driven without legs'. Its meaning is unknown. But this is something that could be said about anything in the gospel. Yeah, anything. Anything? Yeah. Yeah, anything. Have you read Montaigne's essays though? No, are they good? Yeah, anything is good. Anything? Yeah, Any Thing.

◊ By this way of using 'very' the writer probably wants to say 'very' – and that means that (even though it's not very anything, as John would Say Later

(homo)

(homo)) it was very much true that the following things are very themselves. This is acknowledgebabble while reading the Bible II (not the Bibble), in which the word 'very' doesn't appear too much.

★

From *I Am a Man with a Micropenis*

If I were to inhabit another micropenis, I have decided after much online research and much contemplation that Saint Thomas Aquinas would be my best bet, as the man himself was an astral traveller and meditator, and his consciousness already reaching up into the strange soup of the noosphere (pleroma?) may be the easiest to transfer myself into. Does the micropenis leave some cosmic smear as it is drawn from my perfect form? Is something lost from me when this new life is born? Can these streams, this endless tangled web be unwound and parsed, followed along and matched back to that little cock of the levitator seen rising out of Notre Dame into the high above? To taste life through the mouth of a Saint-micropenis, to cum from the atrophied catapultries of a sanctified body in the world and time of Christ would be life affirmed, my life affirmed, this endless suffering, the suffering of form of the life-giver of life itself, of the woman in labor (she is me) affirmed before mine own eyes before mine own mind before mine own micropenis. Oh how I would enjoy rubbing up against those Catholic girls in my charge. How I would chase the women of the day around and plunge the Italian doctor down into Dante's many rings. How I would cum inside my jewel-encrusted tunic and rub myself in the green grass and let the sun cook my fat body alive until the fields stank of old baloney and the Church had me burned for the bad omen of my foul scent. And I would die a man who lived of purpose, who had his seed touch flesh of woman and who felt the grass beneath him, despite the trappings of his micropenis. But history is history. And past is past. And I must satisfy myself if I am to satisfy myself at all for the time being with levitation. My journey will be a long one, along many gradations of life, and only after experiencing many lives of the micropenis will I find that rare and outlier form which found within itself the foundations of a life. But here I am going on and on ... I must compose myself. I know escape is only a dream. A sick and haunting dream.

I knock against the wall and listen for a sound. The walls are a sheet metal and the impact rolls in one neat wave throughout the room. I have wondered if my room is not falling. I have wondered if one day I were to step through that door and try to find a world accepting of my micropenis I would find anything but void. I go on the computer. I decide to watch some pornography. I have many Jordan Peterson many folders of pornography saved on many different harddrives, meticulously sorted, a library which covers the entire spectrum of erotic desire, pornographic medium and genre. I have woodcarvings from the 5th century of a man fisting a shemale's ass. I have telescopic photos of Byzantine erotica. I have the entire xhamster database. I wrote a program in Python to automatically

ically download a video every time something new is uploaded to its servers. I have even dabbled in homosexuality, bestiality, necrophilia, and self-snuff (mostly out of boredom; my preference is fairly vanilla truth be told). And yet I rarely if ever return to a piece of pornography. I wonder, *and I wonder often!* why it is I collect, why I cannot part with a single piece of pornography when all I get off to is young girls' nudes on imgur or a crease in my gut that looks vaguely feminine or bodily from a certain angle.

★

From *The Curse of Knowledge*

THIS book is malignantly useless, as it is every book written by the members of a chilean knitting forum. But someday, sooner than one might expect, a drooling retard will read this catalogue of human stupidity and decide that consciousness is indeed a punishment. He will have the might, the strength to destroy all life.

★

From *La Sorbonne*

POST-IRONY is when you've been an insincere dickhead for so long that you can no longer express yourself in a normal way and your sincere and ironic expressions are melded so that your method of communication becomes totally inefficient and foreign to all but your friends with a similar affliction. This is the voice alt-lit is written in, I would describe it as an experience where the only hint you have that what you're reading isn't entirely a joke is because its not making you laugh. □ First there's the main guy, Tao Lin, he has a publishing house called muumuu house which fucking lena dunham's character in *girls* works at, how embarrassing. □ He's a rapist also but we'll get to that in a bit. □ Anyways, Mira Gonzalez, the only thing I remember about her is seeing a tweet about her taking drugs at disneyland and it was posted at like noon on a tuesday and I've hated her ever since. Her poetry is about getting fucked by really skinny guys and feeling bad after, she also defended Tao Lin after it turned out he raped a trans man so I'm gonna give her a pass. □ Lin was having sex with a 16-year-old when he was 22 and he made him stay under 125 pounds, write his failures as a lover, wear a dress and he also just stole his writing for a commercial work. Lin tortured this person and most of the movement defended him, and bear in mind that he hardly what does Robert Brasillach say to Henri Massis? though he acknowledges most of the accusations and he took action against gawker which is usually commendable but in this instance it was to try and get an article in *Jezebel* which catalogued his admitted crimes taken off the site. Imagine someone being such a cunt that you end up being in support of Gawker Media. □ How about a literary movement made up of the guys at bars who touch your shoulder in apology when they bump into you or kids who found a snake in their garden. I could name 100 types of people whose experience I'd rather understand before I reached the quiet sad rich rapist on adderall. □ Reading the

details

details of a life of a poor person would be so miserable it might actually be literature or alternative. 8:14 PM dad got home from his job as a janitor with dinner, 40 chicken nuggets for my sister and I, I took mine back to my room to eat while I play *cs:go*. 11:13 PM masturbated on a figure, about to get in bed and pretend I'm cuddling an androgynous catboy and drift to sleep. □ it's interesting to me that a literary voice which has been the same for ten years can be marketed in different ways without striking me as inappropriate in either case, is there another author you can think of who matches the 2008 aesthetic of wearing a dozen patterns, riding one of those spring rides on a playground quietly rawring and trying to figure out his relationship and without changing his writing also fits the 2012 aesthetic of taking molly and leaning against the wall in a club thinking about how you'd rather be at home with a special someone. □ I considered alt-lit as a sort of clever scheme. Like how Patrice Wilson could turn any rich white girl into a pop star, the people at these alt-lit journals could turn any rich kid into a writer with their own commemorative physical book to show for it. Almost like the very probably conspiracy that modern art is partially a money-laundering scheme, rich kids in the alt-lit scene moved around social capital enough among the authors like Lin, the journalists before they turned on them, and the third parties like Caleb who set up lin with readings until they had created a literary movement as if casting a spell or creating a sarcophagus around the air and then assuming that it housed Jordan Peterson a king once it was constructed; there were physical books, there were articles, there were readers but whatever metaphysical element was missing I would attribute to the briefness of alt-lit and which for our purposes I'll just call a soul. This theory was aided by alt-lit authors starting to literally publish their tweets. Another conspiracy I have is that alt-lit is literature's bargaining period. The cultural idea that anything read is better than anything watched, confirmed by these library posters of celebs imploring students simply to read suggests that someone could transcribe their debauchery and grocery lists, publish them and reach an audience not completely dissimilar to the kids who read those *halo* books while pretending to be real writers with only the evidence of their misery which once again our blurb authors can easily mistake for the misery of the working class subject.

★

The Third

FEW men knew this great man as much as I did. His succulence was overwhelming, both traps and spindlers groped his nipple tassels in their cravings for attention. He fulfilled this.

★

Boomer and Zoomer Dialogue

BOOMER: *crack*. *pshhhhhh*. *ssssp*. Yep, those were the days.
ZOOMER: *zooms*. My god is the Fortnite.

B: Forsooth,

b: Forsooth, hast thou not respect for the Dionysian Divinity of Doom (1996)?

z: *zooms*. Inscribed by Oedipal circuitry, no son is truly faithful to the father.

**

From [...] *fragrant fragment ...*]

The swine: workless woodland blob rummaging through feathery bristles to squirm, silently, for its sumptuous amour ... □

— BONK bonk bonk, position my snout toward the Provençal trail, I feel like taking a few steps, trot, before falling on my rump, for an ample slump-and-slouch —

— Is that a plum dropped on the *Oeuvres complètes*? Why, I placed it there myself. To write only with our tails, read only with our antlers

— Zlounch, aye, zed! (Hon, hon!)

**

Tunisia

WIGGLE the inside of your eyeball and see if the bad part comes unhinged. Arabesque overtures to Mosque architecture break open tiles to reveal semitic scrolls underneath. If you clasp your hands fast enough, a coin or two will appear inside. Put them up to your eyes, and wink your eyes, and you'll finally be able to see with your stomach.

If you've ever tried to touch the thing with meaning, you'll know that the thinking engine is the only barrier between you and the truth, and you'll know that your arms aren't strong enough to refuel it.

Wiggle the inside of your eyeball and see if your stomach starts hurting. Dusty desert winds haven't yet named the Synagogue where the old men died. The old men who died forgot to name their houses before they went on. With a coin or two from the local hospital, any Synagogue gets his name. Old men who die don't deserve the same luxury. Old men who live provide themselves with the sole luxury of the sustenance of a name. Convert it into a Mosque, convert the whole Jew into the whole Muslim, break open the desert winds and put the pregnant stomachs in line, row by

row

row, insufficient and egoless dead living children, and the Mosque will get a name.

Most things don't have names, because you want to look at the whole time of it. That's the nice thing about writing and about graves, is you start to give things names for a long time. First of all, there's Gail Arbuckle, and she died when she was 83, and she is carried on by her loving husband, her four children, and her faithful church community. 'Rest in peace grandma,' says the world, remembering the word for grandma for the first time. Now grandmothers have a name. The world is displeased with its insufficient vocabulary. It gets pleasantries, the hellos and goodbyes and the 'dearest darlings' and the 'dearly beloveds' and the stairways to heaven that build lanes unpopulated by cars which still remain unnamed. No one will put a car on a gravestone, though their hearts stop beating every day on the side of the road under threat of dusty dry wind.

There's a room in Gafsa where nobody lives anymore, except for seven people: mom, dad, grandpa, grandma, and the little one, and the little one, and the little one who isn't alive and won't become. Their stomachs are full up with soggy rice and yogurt in a steel bowl, and a memory that cavemen had no need for. Stupid grave-stones, stupid grave-stones, leave the people in Gafsa alone. They would just like to pray. How can you let them pray while you've cursed them with memory too? We know it's not your fault, you didn't ask for cuneiform.

Luckily we came alive, even though they already invented writing. I'm hoping that we're the last thing that comes alive, because the cuneiform is running out of forms to take, and the grave-stones are really starting to get heavy. We think they'll sink into the earth with the next rain, and then the soil will have to expand its lexicon from 'grandpa' and '穆罕默德' to 'Tuscaloosa', 'courthouse', and unfortunately, 'قصة'. We wondered why that one didn't sink yet, since so many, so many have died. But we know that they know better, and we also know that no one wants to be buried in a cage. Especially not the grave-stones, we know, because they do it every rain.

**

Now the book gets REALLY GOOD ...

(KEEP this page at the end) ☐ and don't erase this (☐ neither this).





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Might I my quietus make
With a bare bodkin
For thy thesaurus' sake
Read a pair that's in
Bring not the pie nor cake
But a new napkin
Else I'll cry thou thy lake
Go for a night swim

Anonymous 05/30/23(Tue)13:31:59 No.22094064 ►
File: 41In+T-YoL_SX308_BO1,20(...).jpg (22 KB, 310x499)



>my process for writing pic related

I do all of my composition in the URL bar of my browser. This text field is ideal for creative writing. I will compose a few sentences before copy/pasting it to the chat dialogue of my Minecraft server and exporting that into a text file and posting it to a pastebin.

Then I will print roughly one hundred to 2000 copies of every word in the English language (according to an algorithm that I wrote that weighs the distribution of individual letters based on their value in the game of Scrabble) in six point typefont at the local library (I can use the library showers while it prints) which I've managed to pare down to a cost of \$6200 USD.

Then I will painstakingly cut out each letter by hand before collating them and organizing them into a system that I developed using a combination of C++ and a series of physical (brand name) Rolodexes from the late seventies to the early eighties. From here I will prepare to edit my manuscript by purchasing about \$14,000 USD worth of masking tape and glue gunning my individual words onto the tape according to my pastebin.

After building a very long wooden fence, I will then adhere the tape to the fence, which runs the length of my parents' 140 acre property in rural British Columbia (and several kilometres onto their neighbours' livestock easement (in Alaska)) and hire a local stableboy to check twice my work. Here I can edit and revise my work before transcribing it onto A4 via a mechanical typewriter for my agent's sake, which then—I assume—she must subsequently scan and save to a PDF file before sending that off to any publishers.

This entire process is a very powerful method of writing and allows for more creative control than Microsoft Word or Google Docs (I might use Scrivener but it isn't free plus Alexa Donne uses Scrivener and nobody wants to be caught with the same desktop icons as she has). I strongly recommend this system to anybody who considers themselves to be seriously dedicated to their craft, and might even suggest that employing any less technical pretence than this comprehensive approach disqualifies you as a writer and that if you don't reply to this post your mother will die in her sleep.

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Mixta Hyperborea

I met Josh

on the first day of sixth grade.

We had assigned seats, (boy girl boy girl) and our homeroom teacher had sandwiched an after-school ballerina named Daisy between us.

Josh was a pudgy Hispanic. His head was shaved. He was wearing Dickies, the Meixcanest brand of khakis. I don't remember too much from 6th grade, but I remember a general air of desperation in the opening weeks. Even on that first day, I remember sensing exactly which, mostly pretty, mostly blonde (though not without exception) girls were going to be conventionally popular, and which would remain on the social periphery. The guys in the room were harder to pin down.

Looking back, it seems that male popularity had a dynamic unpredictability to it. Massive fluctuations took place from year to year with boys rising, falling, and then rising once again. Someone would return from summer with a six-pack and gain higher footing. Someone else would get caught rubbing their dick during science and landslide to the bottom. Weirder, seemingly disturbed boys who were low on the ladder would find a way to channel their strangeness into novel personalities and ascend. Others who successfully operated as class clowns would find the class had grown past their sense of humor.

Brock Campbell, a classic beefcake in 6th, had three different girlfriends in the same year. He didn't grow an inch the rest of middle school. By 8th, he was a cherubic dwarf amongst a sea of broadening shoulders.

Charlie Pantano was targeted for having a meth-head Mom who picked him up from school with dirty skin. In 6th, disclosures of his home life repelled people and creeped them out. In 7th, told with self-deprecating confidence, sensational and hilarious examples of her degeneracy became a wishing well of social capital.

Word on the street is she blew Dennis Rodman. Where the boy's reputations were dynamic, the girl's were static. With few exceptions, the princesses of 6th Grade remain the queens of senior year.

This is not to say that their attractiveness was static. Attractiveness is correlated with female popularity, but not with causality.

It's about influence.

The ability to barter secrets, strategically deploy compliments, and mercilessly conjure-up rumors are skills more inborn than acquired.

Daisy sat between Josh and I in 6th Grade Homeroom. He leaned back in his seat and we made eye contact. "Do you like sports?"

"No," I lied, because I thought he was an Arab. 9/11 had happened less than a year ago, and I wasn't taking any chances. If I knew he was Mexican I would have answered differently.

Actually, I wouldn't have.

I avoided him the rest of the day.

After school was our first basketball practice. We changed in the bathroom, silently, intimidated by the rowdiness of the 7th and 8th graders. I forced myself to change in the open, embarrassed that so many of my peers were stall changers.

Our 6th-grade coach was a gelatinous waste of life. He was droning on about "hustle" and "dedication" when a bunch of us started coming up with secret handshakes. I was unimpressed by the lack of originality. Josh made a motion to fist-bump me, and I raised my arm to meet his knuckle. At the last second, he turned his fist into a plane and crashed it into my chest.

"Terrorist," he said.

Brock Campbell was so bothered by our laughter he turned around.

"How about you shut your mouth so I can focus?" He said gayly.

"How about you open your mouth so I can put my balls in it?" Josh responded reflexively, shrugging his shoulders in genuine suggestion.

Kicked out of the first practice.

Both of us.

A long walk back to campus past rush hour traffic. A buzzing heat descended from the cloudless sky. "I think we're moving faster than the fuckin' cars," he said.

"Way fucking faster," I swore back.

My first curse of the school year.

It felt good.

It rolled off the tongue.

Very natural delivery.

"Fuck them."

"Yeah fuck them," I agreed, not sure if he was referring to the people in the cars, the coach, or Brock Campbell.

"..."

"..."

"What are the odds that you'd flip one of them off?" He asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What are the odds, like the game."

"Never played."

"You must have come from some special school for retarded people."

"Or maybe 'what are the odds' is a special game they only teach to retarded people," I suggested.

"You have to know how to do fractions to play. Retarded people can't do fractions."

"That's what they tell retarded people to delude them into thinking they aren't retarded. They teach something, like fractions, that the rest of us learned in 2nd grade and they tell them it's middle school stuff. Sounds like what happened to you."

"Oh, I bet you know a lot about fractions."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I engaged, noticing one of my cousin's friends in an oncoming car. Sun-piercing rays overhead. A total lack of pedestrians on either the sidewalks or the surrounding parking lots. "I think you know what it means," said Josh.

"I think I need some clarification."

"Your dick is a fraction."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"It is a fraction actually," I agreed.

"I'm glad you admit it."

"It's a fraction of that telephone pole"

"Oh yeah?" Josh said.

I'd been laughing pretty hard, this was the first time he laughed back.

"And the fraction is 9/10," I said.

"9/11," He said.

"My dick is a fraction of the twin towers."

"My dick is a fraction of Mount Everest."

"My dick is a fraction of Africa," we continued, for a while longer, logically ending on the assertion that my dick was a fraction of the observable Universe.

A bunch of light-shaded older women walked out of a Boston Market and began to hug each other. Broken through grass collected in the corners of decaying sidewalk squares.

Apartments.

Mostly undecorated.

About one in five of them were decorated.

We arrived back at campus. It was empty. A few loose leaf papers remained in the previously bustling student courtyard. Who was in control here? I went to the bathroom, empty as well. Who was preventing me from intentionally plugging the toilets? I went back outside and collected my things from my locker. Who was preventing me from pissing all over the bottom row? The lack of supervision was eerie and disturbing.

School with the volume all the way down. School as a statue. School hibernating, recovering from the chaos of the day with silence and rest.

Places of frantic congregation might require these periods of quiet. They are able to scrub themselves of their accumulated energies, avoiding the calcified mania of 24-hour operations. Gas stations, fast food restaurants, police departments. The endless molding of radiated energy into the floors and ceilings.

"Hey, your mom's picking you up at six still right?" Josh yelled, echoing through columns of rusty lockers. "Yeah."

"I like literally live right next to school. You could come over if you want."

"Mom has to meet the parents before I can visit new houses."

"Do you always listen to your Mom?"

"No."

"Because I always listen to your Mom. Especially when she tells me to massage her breasts."

"Breasts," I highlighted, "Not her boobs."

"No. Her breasts," he insisted.

I took out my lunchbox and grabbed something inside. "Maybe next time we get kicked out. I'm going to fuckin' wait for her here."

"All right see ya tomorrow homie."

"See ya."

The next day we were bouncing a bottle cap back and forth on Daisy's desk. Mr. Talon was outside so we continued even when she asked us to stop. I threw the bottle cap too hard and it hit her in the face. She started sobbing like she'd broken her leg. Everyone got performatively angry at me and performatively worried about her health.

"Jesus Christ," Josh said, laughing at her overreaction, "What a fuckin' baby."



I was allowed

to sleep over once I got to 7th Grade. Most of the time at Josh's house. A few at Jack's. One at Chang's where we couldn't even watch TV and his mom served Caesar Salad as a main course (very Asian behavior). Most blended together, but T.J. Geiger's 13th birthday stands out. The night's memory is immune to the gradual decay that obscures most of the era. Years go by and it still feels like last week.

Josh was invited, as was I. Alongside us was Jack Moriarty, Michael Chang, T.J.'s cousin, and of course, T.J. himself.

"Everyone ask your parents for like twenty bucks," said Josh, two days prior, at our regular lunch bench. "Tell them we're going to see the 6:15 showing of Kangaroo Jack at the Pioneer Mall," I interjected, "Tell them we're meeting at T.J.'s house at 5:00, his Mom can drop us off in her van."

"Also tell them that T.J.'s Mom has volunteered to give us all hand jobs. And she's going to use both hands for mine but she'll probably only use one hand for Jack's," said Josh.

"The movie is rated PG if anyone's parents ask." "Do we really have to see Kangaroo Jack? Isn't that a kid's movie?" asked Jack, lagging intellectually.

"We aren't seeing Kangaroo Jack Einstein. We just need the money for our midnight excursion," I responded, "I'll let you explain that part T.J."

"One secie," T.J. muffled.

He finished chewing his Smucker's and sat up. "Okay, so my parents are pretty chill. They usually drink and fall asleep at like 10:00. Once they do, we can leave the guest house, hop the backyard wall, and then go to Waffle House at like midnight for some eggies and bacon. My cuzie and I do it all the time."

"Stop talking like that. You sound like a fag," said Josh. "You're just jelly."

"Jesus Christ dude."

"Let's get back on track," I redirected, "Once we're dropped off, Josh is going to buy one ticket for Kangaroo Jack, then make his way over to the Southside exit door to theater seven. He's going to open the door when the coast is clear, we're all going to walk in, and then we're going to see 8 Mile for the price of one ticket."

"I'm not allowed to see 8 Mile," said Mike Chang. "I'm not arrowed to see 8 mire," repeated Josh in an exasperated Asian accent.

Chang was born in America.

So were his parents.

His grandparents actually were as well.



Mom Said

something about violent video games as we pulled up to the Geiger's cookie-cutter two-story. I ignored her, too distracted by visions of the near future.

I got out of the car and filled my lungs with pure American air.

'I love this goddamn country,' I thought to myself. It was a warm day, verging on hot. I had a backpack filled with a change of clothes, a toothbrush, and a Mix-CD titled, T.J.'s Birthday Mix. Andrew Jackson rested in my pocket; his time was yet to come.

Mom insisted on coming inside. I heard her say something else to Mrs. Geiger about violent video games as I strolled toward the guesthouse. I remember Josh and Chang were playing Mortal Kombat. I remember five pairs of basketball shorts. I remember smooth knuckle bumps and wide grins as we pooled our money on the coffee table. Chang, T.J.'s cousin, Jack, and I had Jacksons. Josh had a Hamilton. T.J. asked for a drumroll before pulling out a Ulysses S. Grant and tossing it on the pile.

\$140 total, an embarrassment of riches.

Each of the seat-backs in Mrs. Geiger's '99 Honda Odyssey had an organizer with little cubbies and pockets (each of the pockets were filled with candy). I handed her the Mix-CD and warned her about a few explicit lyrics. The first track began, *Forgot about Dre feat. Eminem*. Heads began to nod in sync with the opening beat. As the song continued, a few were brave enough to rap along.

*I told 'em all, All them little gangsters,
Who you think helped mold 'em all?
Now you wanna run around talking bout guns,
like I ain't got none,
What you think I sold 'em all?*

Mrs. Geiger didn't complain about the lyrics. Instead, she waved her hands in the air like a gang member and laughed. T.J. was annoyed and told her to stop.

Everyone else's parents were cooler than my own. Everyone else's pantry had sweeter cereals and name brand chips.

I thought I would do just fine as an emancipated minor with some kind of welfare stipend.

We arrived at the Pioneer Mall. Mrs. Geiger pulled up next to the colonial statue and debriefed about pickup. We had some time before the movie so we walked around.

"Who would you want to fuck the most in our grade?" Asked Jack.

Rachel Small," answered Josh.

I said Natalia Pfizer. T.J. said Faith Parker. Chang initially refused to play before admitting Caroline Swegler. T.J.'s Cousin couldn't play because he didn't go to Golden Sierra.

"Which girl in the 8th grade would you fuck?" Asked Jack.

We played again. We also played the high school version, but most of us only knew the names of one or two high schoolers.

T.J.'s Cousin hadn't spoken.

I turned to him, remembering that G-d smiles on those who involve quiet people in conversations.

"Who's the hottest girl at your school?" I asked. "Oh man..." He looked up squinting, "Probably Valerie Hernandez."

"Is she a Mexie?" Asked T.J.

"No, she's North Korean dipshit," said Josh.

"Yeah, she is Mexican..." He answered, "I fucked her actually."

Everything froze.

The Oceans went flat and the Earth stood still. "You did?" I asked, bewildered, the mind reeling to process his answer.

We were all obviously virgins. Only Josh had even kissed a girl and he was probably lying.

Ray's Cousin was short and somewhat fat. His hair was spiked with gel. He was wearing a tight navy-blue Under Armor shirt, a lime green paper bracelet from the State Fair, and a pair of baggy blue jeans. He had done it.

Achieved the penultimate victory.

Shattered the diamond ceiling.

"How many people at your school have had sex?" I asked.

"I don't know. A lot. It's a public school so people fuck all the time. I fucked like seven girls so far," he reported. Shivers down our spines.

Cold sweat down our backs.

"What grade are you in?"

"7th. Same as you guys..." He said casually, drawing a monopoly of attention from a group that had prior forgotten his presence.

What was his name? Ray? Roy? Rick? I asked Chang about this a few weeks ago and, though he remembered this conversation vividly, he couldn't remember him as anyone other than T.J.'s cousin.

"How was it?" I asked.

"Fucking sick. It rules. I came all over her."

"How do you get them to have sex with you?" Asked Josh.

"Usually just like walk up to them at a party and make some jokes or something. Usually, then I just invite them back to my room or I go to their room or something. Or at school like in the bathrooms or in closets and stuff."

"Do you use a condom?" I asked a little too eagerly. "Never."

"..."
"..."
"..."

A jealous silence rattled between us.

What the fuck were we doing in a private school? How pointless our efforts in personal appearance seem when a bridge troll or troglodyte reveals hidden powers of effortless seduction. It won't occur to me until even a few years from now that he might have been lying.

When it was time for the movie, we splintered from Josh. He got his Kangaroo Jack ticket and waited by the 8 Mile exit door. Three knocks, he opened, we filed in and looked around. Having been caught sitting alone, we knew the key was to sit next to older patrons because the theater police assume they're your parents. We saw an elderly couple in the back rows and made our way to them.

Jack turned to me during the Dolby Surround Sound intro and whispered, "All... around... you..." into my ear. A theater officer with a flashlight briefly examined us, then moved along.

A pre-feature trivia question asked, "To whom did the cat in the opening scene of The Godfather belong?" And it turns out the cat was a stray.

I sat up in my seat, then slowly slouched down, then sat up again.

The lights went out.

A masterpiece commenced. A post-racial tale of brotherhood and determination. Its final scene, in which Eminem subverts his opponent's ability to "diss" him by owning his own failings, remains one of the most formative and instructional fables of social survival. Its conclusion riled the theater into a fracas of cheers and applause. Also, when Brittany Murphy got railed in the back of the factory, Josh made a performance of rubbing his crotch like a masturbating woman and moaned so loud that the elderly couple changed seats.

The lights went up.

We stared at each other in silent appreciation. T.J.'s Mom had been calling him for 10 minutes, already waiting outside, so we rushed out the exit door.

"How was the movie?" She asked.

"Incredible," T.J. answered, side-eyeing the back of the van.

"What do you guys want for dinner?"

"Pizzie."

"You mean Pizza?" Asked Josh.

"Pizzie," T.J. clarified, staring him down.

"Would you say your son sounds cool when he talks like that or would you say he sounds like a dork Mrs. Geiger?" Mrs. Geiger laughed.

We couldn't tell why she was laughing so hard. She had a tan and a face full of freckles, and her voice sounded raspy and warm.

She closed her eyes when she laughed, despite the driving. When she was almost done, she used the side of her index finger to carefully clear a tear from her lower-lid mascara.

"This is what I want to know boys! What defines a "dork" exactly?"

"What do you mean?" Said Josh.

"What is a dork? I can't tell you if T.J. sounds like one until you define it."

T.J. was weary of her talkative nature but somewhat impressed with her captivating effect on his friends. He didn't shut her down.

"Someone who told a girl she had nice shoozies after school yesterday," said Josh.

"Ohhhhhh which girl!?" She erupted, pinching T.J.'s shoulder.

"Faith Parker," T.J. said, "And if Josh tried to talk to her she'd probably puke."

"Faith? Jesus Christ!" She said, "Not one of those religious nut jobs, please! I will not be in-laws with those election stealers and warmongers!"

"Why are they warmongers?" I asked.

"I'm not saying they planned it," she looked at me in the rearview mirror, pointing her finger at my reflection, "But they knew it was going to happen and they did nothing, or they made sure it would get done! Anything for one more precious barrel of oil!"

I was impressed by her conviction. I didn't know much about this issue, but I knew almost immediately that the next time it came up, I would repeat her opinion verbatim, performing her lines with identical confidence. Not to be correct necessarily, but to try and replicate the statement's transfixing effect on myself. I used to do this often with opinions, trying on their rhetorical affect, rather than vetting them for a relationship to reality.

"Anyway...just don't believe everything you see on TV," she said, adjusting her bandana, "But back to the subject at hand here, why do you think T.J. was being a "dork" when he told that girl she had nice shoozies? I want an answer here. Think."

"Like...he was trying to be cool or something. Like he was trying to have this cool-ass...sorry for cursing." "Excused," she said, waving her hand.

"This cool little way of phrasing things with an E sound at the end."

"Okay, so dorks are people who try to be cool?" "Dorks are people who do dorky shit...sorry again," said Josh.

"Excused," she waved again, "But what is dorky shit?" "Dorky shit is shit that...yes you're trying to be cool, but you're not trying to be cool as in fit in with everyone, you're trying to be cool by not fitting in and being weird."

"So a dork is someone who wants to seem weird?" "Not exactly weird, more like cool in their own unique way. Very gay behavior."

"What makes something gay?" She continued. "Why?" Asked Josh.

"I'm curious," she said, rolling down her window, "...I guess I want to see if anything has changed." "Well, I know people used to say things were gay in like Shakespeare's times in order to just say something was happy. But now gay means you like men and it's more of an insult. But I wasn't saying it in the "I love men way" but more in the "that's lame" kind of way," he explained. "Okay so a dork is someone who tries to be cool by being weird, and that type of behavior is gay because wanting to be cool by being weird is lame. Which I guess would mean that wanting to be cool by fitting in would be less gay than wanting to be cool by being weird." "I guess Mrs. Geiger...Honestly, I wasn't even going to say dork."

"What were you gonna say?"

"It's a really bad word I can't say it."

"I won't tell your Mom, and you guys won't either right?" She pointed to the audience in the Van's last row, "Especially you Michael, your Mom already has me on thin ice!"

"I won't," said Michael stiffly.

"Okay Josh, what did you really want to say?" "I was going to say he sounds like a faggot."

Some collective snickering.

The chips were all in.

"What makes someone... that?" She asked cautiously. "Everything I said before...but even gayer."

"Got it."

"So," I asked after a few seconds, "Is T.J. a faggot for saying Pizzie?"

"Alright let's cool it on the language, but I'll answer your question, I don't think so, he's definitely not that...but he is a bit of a dork," she laughed, pinching him on the arm a second time.

Playaz Club played next on the Mix-CD.

"So Pizza then?" She asked.

"Maybe Mexie," Said T.J.

*Me and my homies, we tighter than a glove
We chop a lot of game is how we do it at the
Playaz Club Check the fool or kick it in the tub
'Cause we kick much ass at the Playaz Club*

"So Pizza then?" She asked.

"Maybe Mexie," Said T.J.

We returned to the guest house.

Indistinguishable Mortal Kombat matches blended together. T.J. figured one unblockable move with Scorpion and just did it over and over again until it stopped being fun. Jack threw a controller after five straight losses.

The pizza came with a large Fanta. The controllers got pretty greasy. The guesthouse had French doors, and the sun set behind them. Josh showed everyone the stickers on the bottom of his skateboard and told us that it used to belong to his uncle. T.J.'s Cousin told us he had no idea who his dad was. A few were lucky enough to claim couches, the rest of the sleeping bags were on the floor.

T.J. played electric guitar for everyone, he knew Smoke on the Water and Iron Man.

The only other game we had was a racing game, which got old quickly.

We ran out of things to do.

Jack pulled down Michael's pants.

There were still a few more hours to go until the parents went to sleep.

We passed the time by watching an MTV reality show called *Elimidate*. The premise of the show was that one lucky guy or girl would go on a date with five members of the opposite sex simultaneously. Every so often, the dater would eliminate one of their suitors from the group until there was only a couple left. Every episode seemed to have one wildcard contestant who faced early elimination. One guy brought a snake on a date. One guy dressed like Elvis. In another episode, one featuring a bachelorette and four competing men, tension arose between the oldest competitor and the youngest. The men joked about his age, throwing off his game and raising the stakes on the woman's decision. When there were only two left, the younger and the elder began to argue about who could fulfill her "fantasies."

The younger said he had the skill and bravely kissed the woman.

The camera cut to the older guy, his dead eyes avoiding their lingering make-out. When they finished, he desperately tried to initiate his own kiss.

The woman waved him off. She asked the older guy if he really wanted the younger guy's "sloppy seconds." Then the young guy kissed her again, for a long time, right in front of him. "He got it first," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

It was midnight.

No lights were on in the house.



T.J. collected the \$132.

Josh grabbed his skateboard.

We carefully left the guest house and walked to the back of the yard. The side gates were locked, so we decided to hop the stucco beige wall. Everyone managed except Chang, who kept saying he didn't want to go. I couldn't tell if he was scared of clearing the wall, or just sneaking out in general.

"Just leave!" He scream-whispered.

"Just reave!" Josh repeated, "Your people know more about walls than anyone. This should be easy for you." "Dude you've got this just hop over," Jack said, "Here, I'll hop back over and give you a lift."

I hoped over with him. We crouched to lift Chang's feet. "Seriously no," he squealed.

"Sererusrsy I'm going to beat the fuck out of you if you don't hop this fucking fence!" Josh warned, picking up his skateboard and holding it like a bat.

Chang stepped on our hands and scrambled his way to the top of the wall. The rest helped him climb down. Death In Vegas' Dirge played in my head.

It was dark.

I had been awake this late, but never outside someone's house. The city was completely barren, aside from the occasional speeding car. Areas near the street lights were illuminated by a golden orange hue, everywhere else was tinted by dark shades of blue and purple. Mildew on the grass. Bug sounds. A car alarm going off somewhere far away. The city as a statue. The city hibernating, recovering from the chaos of the day.

La la la, la la la, la la la, la la la,
La la la, la la la, la la la, la la la,

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I felt a little on edge, thrilled by the lack of supervision. I realized instinctively there was no way of maintaining order at these hours. No way of preventing vandalism, theft, or violence. It was immediately clear, in the midst of such ambient remoteness, that society was not bound by laws and policing, but by a vague and unreliable honor system. A suggestion of civilization to which people lazily acquiesced. It was possible to get away with a lot more than I thought. It was possible to ignore the honor system and exercise one's predatory proclivities on the same streets and sidewalks you safely pass in the sunshine.

kept looking over my shoulder, I kept putting my hands in my pockets and taking them out again. I noticed the lights in a few apartments and felt a little turned on. We walked right through the middle of the street. Right on the orange-painted turn lane.

We came upon a pug.

"Little bitch pug," said Josh.

"Go home," T.J. said with paternal authority. "Go," said T.J.'s cousin, pointing to the house. The pug turned around and walked onto the lawn, then it turned back to us.

"That's right!" Said T.J, "Keep going, go home, you shouldn't be out this late."

"Go," said T.J.'s cousin, "I'm not gonna tell you again. Get inside."

The pug sheepishly walked out of sight and into the home's backyard.

"That's right," said T.J. "And you better stay there. A little puggie is no match for these Compton streets." We continued towards Waffle House. I felt more alert than normal, more able to notice tiny movements on the street's opposing horizons. We passed a massive empty lot of dirt and overgrown weeds.

There was an empty beer bottle on the ground. Josh picked it up and smashed it on the asphalt. "What the hell," said Chang. "Whata da herr," said Josh.

We passed a semi-towering office building.

We passed a few more dirt lots.

Chairs stacked on tables in the windows of restaurants. Moths dying at the bottom of overhead lighting. The Moon, full, illuminating streaks of nomadic clouds. Suddenly, I felt the presence of an idea.

I realized an undeniable affection for the night's danger and ambiguity. I wondered if the natural coddling of my childhood had thus far hidden a dormant desire for precarity and suspense. I felt the need to take risks, secretly, for the rest of my life. It felt like the blossoming of a black tulip on a lead mountain. These epiphanies of development, now gradual in my adolescence, were once initiated by flashes of mental lightning.

It felt like being in tune with my evolution. I considered a long line of my biological ancestors' most gruesome and depraved acts, and it struck me how many were committed in rage and not necessity.

I envisioned clearly how one might collect their anxieties into a vicious dough and form them into a physical being. I felt the euphoric relief of tearing that being apart and shattering its appendages. This struck me not as addictive, or fascinating to the point of consumption, but instead as a genuine and cathartic relief from one's essential nature. A brilliant explosion of claustrophobic walls. The expulsion of midnight bile, which builds in the blood and becomes systemic.

I continued to trace through the brutality of my ancestors, retreating into periods of apish and animal evolution. I saw this tearing impulse in all of them, especially the raw biological materials which consume and infect each other. The same of the gasses and particles which constantly erupt and implode. I continued through the derivatives of creation all the way to the Creator, and then recognized this same blackness in him.

To align myself with this world, I needed to align myself with its laws. The first of which, now suggested explicitly, was the imperial reign of brutal violence.

And it still disturbs me, in a suspicious and meaningful way, that this occurred to me prior to the proceeding events. I surveyed the upcoming block.

We'd have to walk past the 7/11 on the corner of Glenwood and Ash.

"Let's just take a detour and go back a few blocks," said Chang.

"Why? Because there's a bunch of black guys outside the gas station?" Said Jack.

"It's not because they're black it's because they look dangerous."

"I agree bro, the hoods at my school are always strapped," said T.J.'s cousin.

"Jesus you guys are fucking pussies," said Josh. "We're holding \$132 in cash. We should detour," said Chang.

"We can just cross the street, we don't need to detour," I suggested.

"You queers take your detour, I'm going to skate through because I'm not a pussy," said Josh, foot on the edge of his board.

"You're going to skate through alone?" Said T.J. "Yeah, I'm not afraid."

"You sure?" I asked, sensing some fear in him. Not a lot, mostly confidence, but definitely a shred of fear. Josh didn't respond, he just skated off.

We stood perfectly still, watching from a distance. Josh would take a few large strides to get himself going, then put his hands in his pocket and glide along. The gas station looked like the set of a production, lit up by green and orange stage lights in an amphitheater of darkness. The opening chords of *Rape Me* repeated in my head, reminding me of how Cobain fucked with MTV and began playing them live on air. They cycled as I watched Josh descend into a den of complete exposure.

*Rape me
Rape me, my friend
Rape me
Rape me again*

One of the hoodlums pushed Josh off his skateboard. Another grabbed it and began riding. None of us said a word, just watched. When Josh walked towards them, they tossed it over his head and laughed. He stopped walking towards them and stood perfectly still. There were four or five, riding around, taking turns, pointing and laughing at him while they did it.

Josh began to roar, gutturally, his voice cracking and shrieking as he pounded his fists against his head. Then he lunged at the guy holding his board and knocked him against the Ice-Box using his fat-strength. We weren't too far, but I couldn't see exactly what he was doing. It looked like he was trying to bite him. Instead of punching, he seemed to be scratching at his chest with feral rage.

"Nigga what the fuck!" I heard one yell, the only female. "Punch that little nigga he fuckin' insane!" Said another. "Muddafuckka!" She squealed.

The perp dropped the board, and Josh dove for it. He picked it up and skated off with furious speed. When he was out of sight, we sprinted back, detoured through a nearby suburb, and came upon a park on the other side. This all happened, we've compared memories and they all line up.

Josh was sitting on a bench with his head in his hands. When we got closer, we saw that he was crying. "Dude...that was fucking crazy," I said.

"Are you okay?" Said Jack.

He tried to talk but couldn't. We just stood quietly for a while until he was ready.

"I just feel...I don't know...I can't stop...sorry, I'm crying like a bitch," he said after a few minutes. "Like a bitch? Bro. You just iced that nigga! You scared the shit out of him!" Said T.J.'s cousin, "I never seen some shit like that in my life! You're a fucking real G bro!" Everyone felt harder by association.

"Yeah, dude that was awesome. You were like a fuckin' werewolf," I said.

"You're lucky you weren't killed," said Chang. "You're lucky you weren't kirred," said Josh, wiping away his last few tears.

"I'm glad you weren't killed."

"I'm glad you weren't kirred."

"Shut up."

"Thanks Chang," said Josh, "I'm glad I wasn't killed either."

"How come you didn't just run away?" T.J. asked. "I don't know. I wasn't exactly thinking like I normally do," said Josh, "It was like...I was riding through and then I got pushed off. And then I tried to just get it back normally by asking, but...I think if he just ran off with it I wouldn't have followed him. But the way he was laughing...and the way that girl was laughing...I just had one thought...I was thinking that I'd lose if I tried to fight him normally, like boxing style...I felt like...Like he was bigger than me, I wouldn't have won a straight-up normal fight. I didn't have any options...and then I just knew what to do, I knew I had to...I don't know..."

He sat silently for a while.

"We're bigger than most dogs," I said, "We're stronger too, but we're afraid to get in a fight with a dog. It's not because we're outmatched, it's because they have nothing to lose. When a dog fights it doesn't hold anything back. There's no technique. It just becomes this savage animal driven by instinct. I think you knew subconsciously that if you tapped into that, if you held nothing back, it would freak him out."

"Something like that. I don't really know," he said, "Honestly I was also pretty scared."

"What did it feel like?" Said Jack.

"It felt fast...but also slow. I felt like really hyper." "How do you feel now?" Said Chang.

"I feel..." He took a second to think, he flipped over his board and looked at the stickers, "I feel good. My head feels...clear."

"Dang, let's go get you your victory meal bro," said T.J. "Sounds good," said Josh, hopping on his board once again.

We ordered \$98 dollars worth of food and drinks at the Waffle House and left the rest as a tip.

The table was so packed with dishes they served us in multiple courses.

T.J.'s cousin tried to drink as many sodas as he could. He ended up drinking seven sodas.

The food was incredible, probably the best I've had. We walked back achingly full, struggling to scale the wall and return to the guest house.

Once inside, T.J. took out a Porno DVD called, *A Midsummer Night's Cream*. We sat far apart on the couch. A few people commented on the girls in the video, but the room went silent pretty quickly. T.J. brought some hand lotion out of the bathroom and set it on the coffee table. We beat off in silent communion, each occupying a different corner of the room.

We finally turned in. T.J. and his cousin on the pull out couch, the rest of us in sleeping bags.

It was customary to reveal your current crush at this point in the night, when everyone was in bed and staring up at the ceiling.

Josh said Rachel Small. I said Natalia Pfizer. T.J. said Faith Parker. Chang said no one, but kind of Caroline Swegler. Jack said that Caroline kind of looked like Britney Spears.

"Britney Spears is so fucking hot," said T.J.

"I first saw one of her music videos at a barber shop when I was like ten," said Josh, "I got hard in the fuckin' barber chair and refused to stand up when the guy finished cutting my hair. I didn't know what to do so I just kept telling him to take a little off the top until I was basically bald."

"I used to fantasize about marrying her," I said. "I would fantasize about her all the time," said Josh, "I remember lying in bed at night, realizing that no matter what, I would never get to fuck her, and I would get so pissed off about it that I wouldn't be able to fall asleep." I remember laughing so hard that my neck started hurting.

I remember being the last one to fall asleep.

I remember, the next morning, scurrying off to play two extra rounds of Mortal Kombat while my Mom talked to Mrs. Geiger in the doorway.

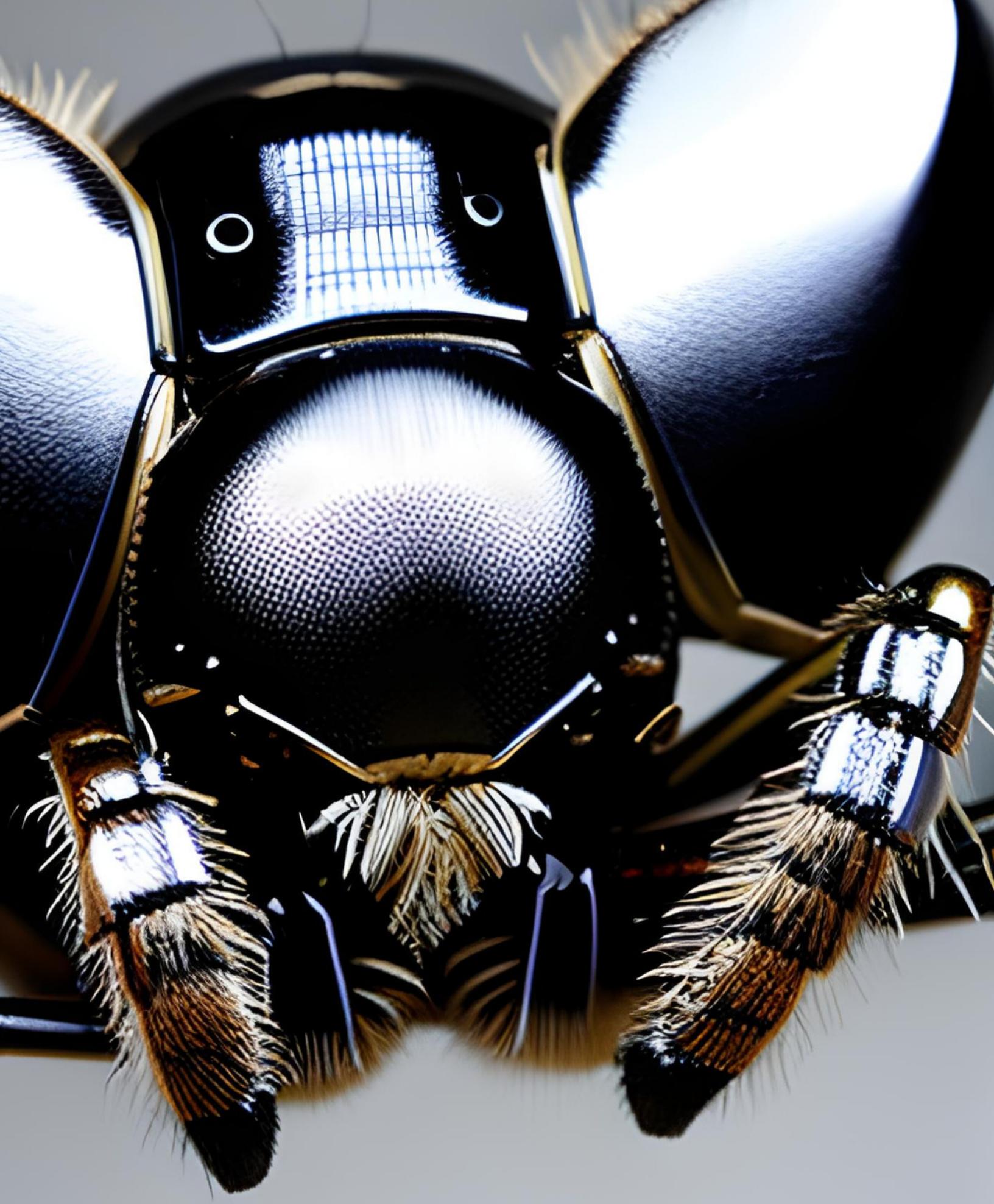
It was a nice drive home.

The next day, in homeroom, Mrs. Stella asked if anyone had anything to share about their weekend.

No one did.

an excerpt from MIXTAPE HYPERBOREA by

**Adem
Luz
Rienspects**



An Interview with Adam Luz Renspergs

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ZA:

You're in your early twenties, right?

ALR:

• • • •

ZA: ...

ALR: I'm in my early twenties, yes.

ZA: As someone squarely in the middle of the Millennial age bracket, I was pretty shocked to discover the author of *Mixtape Hyperborea* was so young. To what do you attribute your unique insight into the zeitgeist of my generation's adolescence?

ALR: I think what older Gen-Z have in common with younger Millennials is that we can consciously remember what it was like when everyone wasn't on their fucking phones all the time.

When I was just a kid, way back in 2007, I went to dinner one night with my parents and younger sisters. Halfway through the meal, my dad pulls out an original iPhone and shows us the pre-installed calculator application, because the actual App Store didn't even exist yet. If you really wanted to impress people, you might download a music video via USB from your iTunes account, but the actual draw was the screen. The shiny flat portal into another world, operated by intuition and touch. An instrument you immediately knew how to play. It completely arrested the mind. I knew when I held the device that things had shifted. At the time, I was optimistic, now I am not. If you're 20 or younger and you're reading this, your formative years were already doomed.

Anyway, for that reason I set the book in 2007. That year also marked the ascension of Obama, the end of the Sopranos, Britney shaving her head, and no shortage of other events which only seem epochal in retrospect. Almost everything in the book is true, but the year is a bit of a lie.

ZA: That's an interesting point you raise about 2007, which is also the year in which half of *The Savage Green* is set. The mid-2000's through the mid-2010's feels like an interesting reflection of what society is going through now. So many things gradually died out as the internet became more pervasive throughout society, but it felt like growth at the time. And these days we're taking one hit after another and we can't even agree what the crisis is, but I do think we're getting closer and closer to realizing what the crisis isn't.

Another interesting element is the plotlessness of *Mixtape Hyperborea*. In MH, the style is the story and it actually works. What's up with that?

ALR: When I was like 11 I watched this interview with Harmony Korine where he explained his approach to filmmaking. Someone asked him why his movies have no "plot," and he responded by saying that when you look back on a good movie, you don't remember the plot, you remember 2-3 moments that stuck out to you. After that I was hooked on the guy. The more I questioned the idea of "plot," the more I realized what I loved about art in general. Plot is completely fraudulent. It's a ridiculous concept. Life has no gradual buildup that results in a structural climax of meaning and tension. Instead, it is an endless desert of hills and valleys that bear nothing in common.

As Camile Paglia notes, the climax was invented as a reflection of the male ejaculation. It's kind of gay when you think about it.

ZA: So, in the absence of plot structure, what is the process of cultivation by which you assembled

Mixtape Hyperborea?

ALR: As I go about my day, things stick out to me. Sometimes it's weird things, sometimes it's beautiful things, often it's funny things. When something sticks out, a conversation, a drive, a co-workers' idiosyncrasy, I write it down in a fake iMessage conversation on my phone. I also write down things that are attractive, things that scare me, and things that I want to share with somebody else. Things that are captivating for mysterious reasons. From 2019-2022, I collected these moments. The more I did it, the more I found myself recalling and recording ones from the past. The more I reflected, the more I appreciated. I think I learned how to live in the moment by living in the past. The book is half recent memories and half distant memories, but it's all real. In about a year, the tidbits turned into a novel.

ZA: Was there any sort of real guiding principle behind the material which you sought to include?

ALR: Mixtape Hyperborea was about the liminality that separates adolescence and adulthood. For me, that time was about music, wasting time, doing drugs, trying to have sex, calling my buddies faggots, and attempting to form a worldview. My hunch is that many relate.



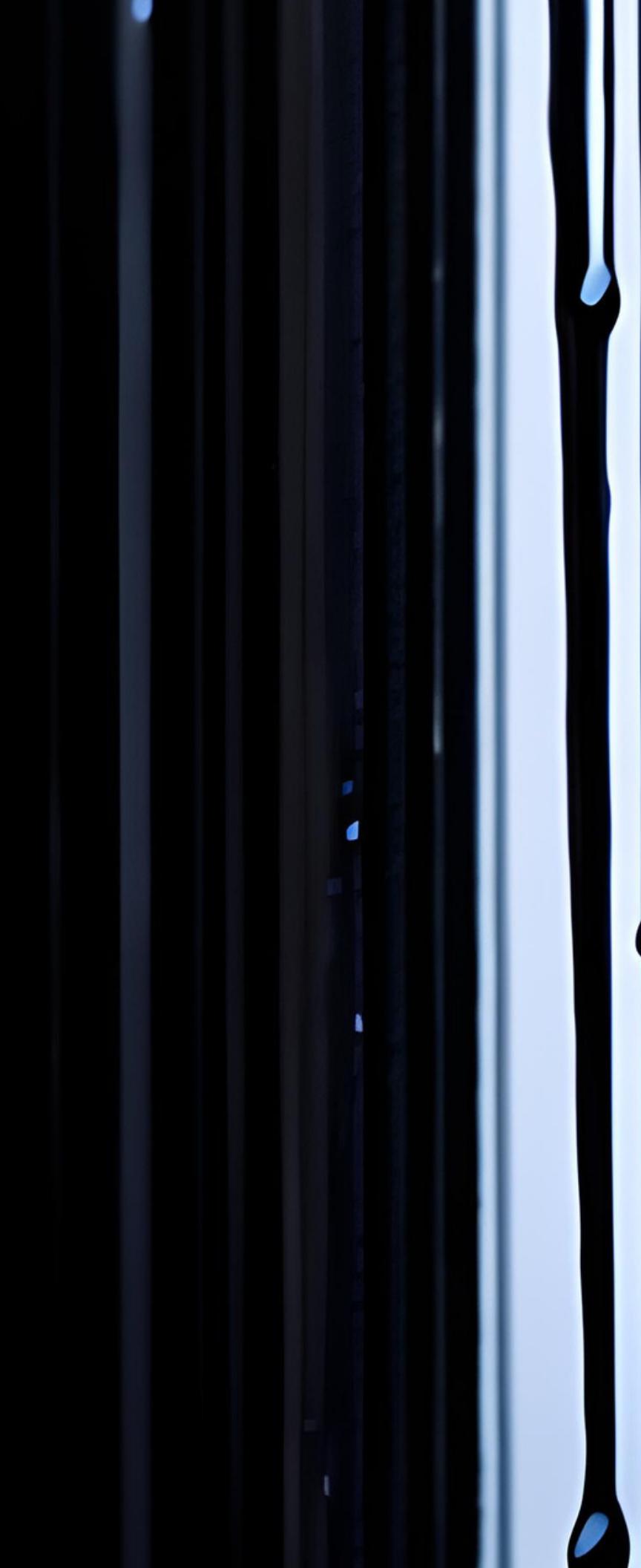
ZA: This isn't exactly your point but the mention of liminality, I think, might reveal why Mixtape succeeds where so many other moody, introspective amateur novels fail. It's deliberately set in the past, but focused on growth and transformation. Almost every chapter features some discussion (if not a demonstration) of evolution or change. It tends to go back and forth between characters maturing in thought as well as deed. It's a premise which automatically creates contrast and therefore interest.

Speaking of growth and change: do you have any more books planned for the future?

ALR: The post-college entrance into real adulthood (ages 22-24) strikes me as the next notable liminality, and I think it will be the setting of the next book. I'd like to write something with a few alternating narrators, and maybe have the text change color as different narrators pass the baton. Maybe they're all roommates? As always, the actual plot is less important than the moments that compose it, and the moments just keep happening. Once I have enough of them, the rest will sort itself out.

ZA: Very zen. So, when everyone is finished reading Mixtape Hyperborea, are there any other /lit/ books you'd advise them to check out?

ALR: My favorite /lit/erature is probably Behead All Satans for its ruthless originality. I'm also a fan of Zulu Alitspa's Cephalopology for a more coherent lovecraftian experience. My favorite book which is spiritually a /lit/ book is Harmony Korine's A Crack Up at the Race Riots.



ZA: Come on, man. I specifically told you not to pick one of my books. I'm going to tell everyone your favorite /lit/ book is Eggplant. But speaking of all that, it seems as though you are so far the highest-selling and best-rated author of the /lit/ Renaissance. How good does that feel?

ALR: The sales were sweet as hell. I gotta say though, I think we're all doing this more for the artistic pursuit than any financial incentive. I've been really touched by the supportiveness of the pimps in this community. Guys like Hartley, Miles, Capitalismo, Herod, Sinclair, and you have given such great feedback, props, recommendations etc. The "Lit Renneissance" has become a little tongue in cheek, but I genuinely feel like we're all in this together. I'd rather be read by ten dudes who really get my stuff than reach some diluted commercial relevance. Honestly, I only want Mixtape Hyperborea to be read by dudes with huge cocks and cool cars.

ZA: We ought to make it a part of the official meme that we all misspell "renaissance" whenever we bring it up. So, for a final note, what does it look like when /lit/'s most popular author sits down to write?

ALR:I have spent more than two grand on a series of Victorian sconces, menorahs, and candelabras. It is a constant drain on my income, but I regularly write by candlelight alone. Usually there's a small plate of frozen mangoes nearby, and Lana Del Rey is playing in the background. I'll usually write for a few hours, than take a halftime break to beat off and walk around the neighborhood (separate activities). When writing, I refuse to give myself a "goal" or try and produce a certain amount of words in a given session. More often than not I get distracted. For example, last night I was writing a dialogue scene where one black guy is asking the other one, "Wassa name a dem peanut 'n' jelly muthafukkas witout da crust?" and the other black guy says: "Uncrussables."

And for the rest of the night I was just doing a bit where I try to remember the names of different snacks in ebonics. I hope that answers the question.

ZA: I hope so, too..

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